THIRTY PIECES OF SILVER

Also by
ANDREW SOUTAR

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Neither Do I Condemn Thee
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An Island for Two
Road to Romance
Pagans
Back to Eden
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Green Orchard
The House of Corbeen
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Silent Thunder
Pursuit
Strange Bedfellows

THIRTY PIECES OF SILVER

A Novel

by

ANDREW SOUTAR

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FOREWORD

THIS novel, built around the fascinating subject of the Silver Standard, was written with the whole-hearted assistance of Sir John F. Drughorn, Bart., The Hall, Ifield, Sussex, than whom few men have a better knowledge of the money markets of the world, or a shrewder idea of how they may be affected.

Apart from the technical knowledge he applied to the task, Sir John suggested many of the dramatic situations in the book. I could not have asked for a better or more enthusiastic Counsellor. He will understand all that I mean by this very inadequate appreciation of his services.

ANDREW SOUTAR.

Thirty Pieces of Silver

CHAPTER ONE

THE Silver Net stretched like a spider's web across the world, from San Francisco to Shanghai, Moscow to Chile. It stretched between the people and the sun! Millions of people.

The centre of the Net was held on the shoulders of a Goliath in London. When he moved—when he inclined his head, opened his lips, or made a gesture with his hand—the Net was shaken with murderous violence so that tremors were felt in remote villages of China, or India, or Russia. Wars waged on the open battlefields were not so devastating, for there was no finality to the reactions of the Goliath's movements.

One tremor of the Net might start another in a sphere of life where danger from its influence had never been considered possible. To-day, a vast area might be humming with the song of industrial activity and seeming prosperity; to-morrow, the vibrations of the Net might touch that area and lay it in waste and famine and chaos that blinds reason and drives men to frenzy.

Silver! Insidious silver! Human life sacrificed on a cross of silver!

The Goliath in London had never voyaged beyond the Mediterranean—he was seldom absent from his post of vigil—but he was aware of every twinge of agony suffered in near and far places when the mesh of the Silver Net tightened around the victims and strangled. His indifference to the suffering was not due wholly to

callousness. The atavistic trait in his character insisted that his ambitions were based on a foundation of sound business principles: man-made law not only condoned, but respected his operations; his shrewdness was genius, said the law, and stood out as an example of ceaseless endeavour, courage, fortitude and indomitable resolution.

The Goliath walked in silence! The mask that hid his identity from the multitude was impenetrable.

Only a very few intimates were privy to the secret. His vast army of agents was controlled by an organization that approximated the extreme in discrimination. Every wing of that army operated under a leader of its own without having conclusive proof of the directing Force: they obeyed a shadow whose commands were given by proxy.

But there was Loewenstein—the sinister suave Loewenstein who ruled even his master, the Goliath.

When famine in a Far Eastern province was followed by rebellion, thousands of natives were slain before the rising was quelled. The newspapers of the civilized world shrugged their pages and wondered what it was all about. When a multitude of starving people cried out for succour, the newspapers lent a sympathetic ear and opened a Relief Fund for the sufferers. Even the Goliath himself contributed to the fund, along with labourers of the field, artisans who could ill afford the mite they gave, hawkers of the street, habitues of public-houses, tempted by the money-boxes pushed insinuatingly towards them by a barmaid, women of the underworld who hoped thus to propitiate the gods in their favour. The newspapers paid eloquent tribute to the magnanimity of the anonymous Goliath.

Then he went back to his post of vigil and shook the Net again!

Three or four banking houses collapsed under the next strain: two or three directors who had been held in high esteem retired to the privacy of their bedrooms,

drew down the blinds, severed the telephone wires and reached for a lethal weapon. The public was stupefied by the tragedies !

The Goliath sent a wreath to the funeral of each suicide.

The Four Years' War threw the world into a maelstrom of agony : the Goliath was aware only subconsciously of the enormity of its cataclysmic effects on humanity : his thoughts were concentrated on the task of holding up the centre of the Net. Ten million men died in the war—with a fatalistic stoicism he refrained from trying to assimilate the fact. The death of ten thousand flies would have been placed by him in the same category of happenings of importance.

In the City of London financial crashes staggered the investors of the country who would have staked their life on the probity of those to whom they had entrusted their money. Suicide followed suicide. The ranks of unemployed swelled daily : publicists disseminated warnings that revolution could not be long delayed, politicians confessed themselves incapable of reviving the fires of industry. Capitalists lost confidence in Labour and hoarded their money rather than risk it in industrial enterprises.

The Goliath paid no heed to all this. Concealed behind a barrier of subterfuge, unassailed by the multitude who knew him not, he shook the Net and joyed in the tremors as the libidinist joys in the appeasement of his unhealthy appetite.

London in 1922 ! In the wake of a soul-crushing war there had come a period of pseudo-prosperity. Arousing itself from the stupor of horror induced by the slaughtering of humanity, the country figuratively reached for its wine in the spirit of one who cries, "To-day we live ; to-morrow we die."

There was no other justification for the extravagance indulged. Progress had been retarded a hundred years, the National Debt was many thousands of million

pounds; posterity was shackled with responsibilities unto four or five generations. The trend of public opinion could not be anticipated even by the ablest of thinkers: the Capitalist fancied he could hear a revolutionary note above the revelry of the masses—the echoes of the rumbling of the tumbrils as they passed through the streets of Paris! He reasoned that he might as well share the extravagance of the masses as be denied it after their revelry was exhausted and the reckoning was taken into account.

No section of Society endeavoured to exercise vision. Let To-morrow take care of itself, they said. The enemy had been defeated in the field of battle. The home Treasury had been depleted, debts had accumulated like dead leaves in the forest when autumn is advanced. What of that? When spring should come the trees would put forth new leaf: when the country had rested after the turmoil in Europe it would devise new means whereby everything should find compensation for that which had been sacrificed.

Money was spent with the improvidence of gamblers who recognize no future beyond midnight. Hotels rocked with the din of plenty, ballrooms were crowded, theatres were full, harlots prospered (an infallible sign of a people's repudiation of responsibility).

Men who had become passing rich by availing themselves of the opportunities that war offers to the unscrupulous and the mercenary, came out of their places of hiding like beetles after the rain: they were unafraid of their wealth and the methods by which it had been accumulated now that the bitterness of war was past.

Money was heaped on the fires of extravagance: No one gave a thought to what might be his position when the chaotic mind of the nation had become rationalized by the grip of poverty.

Motor-car manufacturers laughed exultingly as orders poured in: the new rich were not content to pay the

listed price—they could not wait for the execution of their orders so they tempted with premiums for the privilege of being served out of their turn.

New companies were floated daily: scoundrels enriched themselves without taking the precaution to mask the villainy of their designs. The public was too intent on satiating its lust for pleasure to question the honour of those who pandered to it.

There might have been a few who voiced a warning against the incontinence of a nation that had sacrificed the flower of its manhood to war, but they were hushed into silence by the taunt of "killjoy", "jeremiah", "ghost at the feast".

Those who deigned to find justification for the spirit of abandon cited the time-honoured logic that the vanquished in war must expect to pay the price of defeat. Soon, soon, they argued, there would be an adjustment of finances, a sharing of the blood money, a squeezing of the enemy that had forced war upon them, an indemnity of such magnitude that the agony of four long years would find at least a modicum of solace.

Eat, drink, and be merry! A new generation had arrived for recognition. The liberties that war engenders were multiplied a thousand-fold. "Broaden your mind," was the injunction to the elders who professed alarm for the morals of the nation. "If war was moral in *your* eyes," they said, "freedom of life in peace is not immoral in ours."

The social restrictions in time of war were not relaxed: the moralists in authority were content with that sop to their conscience. Restrictions were ever a goad even to the most law-abiding: night-clubs sprang up like fungi to take the place of hotels that closed before midnight in compliance with the law.

Wine, women and song was the answer to the exhortations of those who had been stigmatized as unctuous hypocrites. The libertine came into his kingdom. Even from the seats of learning he came to wallow

in the dregs of indifference. Women were regarded just as they would have themselves regarded. Equality between the sexes must always result in the lowering of woman's standard: never can a man lift a woman to his level; seldom does she fail to drag him down to hers. And without the protection of man's chivalry woman becomes a thing of usage, malleable as clay in his hands, amenable to his pleasure, subservient to his lewdness. To acknowledge the need of his protective chivalry is, to her mind, to confess inferiority.

False prosperity! False reasoning! Erroneous conceptions of equality, of moral strength, of thwarted desires. Easy friendships followed by easier divorces. Pernicious cults inaugurated to justify wanton tendencies. What had been regarded as unspeakable offences against Society were metamorphosed into concessions to art.

No restraint in conversation. Epicenes and catamites emerging from their noxious holes to ply their calling in the light of day—objects for jest, but not opprobrium. Male and female harlots competing in rivalry without recourse to the segregation which even Ancient Rome demanded in the extremes of her decadency. Hedonism before everything!

And when hedonism is paramount in the life of a people selfishness thrives. There is no disposition to be sympathetic. The dismal voice jars the ears and nerves of the lotus-eaters. "If you cannot bring a laugh to the festive board," they say, "keep away. Get to your corner and die, if you will, but don't spoil our pleasure with your groans." Better to play the spartan than the suppliant. The hedonists applauded the self-destruction of the gambler who rose with a smile from his run of bad luck and retired into the solitude there to blow out his brains or lift the phial of cyanide to his lips. To ease their conscience his friends, or acquaintances, might murmur: "If he had waited only another day we might have helped him out of his troubles."

In the City men worked hard to retain their grasp

of the rationalism of pre-war days, but they found it an almost insuperable task to control the shifting moods of investors. Every day there were dramatic changes in fortune, but in pursuit of pleasure and forgetfulness the public refused to concern itself with what it believed to be minor tragedies: they happened to-day and were expunged from memory before the morrow.

Many of the tragedies were not exposed to public gaze and comment. A speculator, appreciating finality of things and disdaining theatricality, would write to a few of his creditors, thank them for past favours and regret his inability to meet his liabilities on settling day. He would not be at the office next morning, and in a little while they might learn that he had succumbed to a heart attack, or had met with a fatal accident on his way home to the suburbs. To leave farewell letters lamenting the tendencies of the age was distinctly bad form; it wasn't British, and might, conceivably, restrain the generous from helping the bereaved family in the hour of crisis.

On an evening when the newspapers were proudly displaying quotations from the American Press, relative to the courage with which the British were discarding their war griefs, two City men of considerable prominence in their profession, faced each other in a first-class compartment of a suburban train. One, a fair-complexioned man of middle age, opened the evening newspaper and gave the other—a dark, sallow man—a nod of greeting. Together they had travelled up and down to the City for years, but such is the natural aloofness of the British that neither had more than a vague idea of the other's business.

"Silver still down," said the fair man, casually.

"It will go lower," said the dark man. There was nothing remotely resembling lament in his voice. "What was the lowest quotation to-day?"

"Thirty and three-eighths."

"And the highest?"

"Thirty-seven and three-eighths."

"That's sixpence an ounce lower than last year? . . . You're not in silver?"

"No, thank God! Nor you, or you'd have seen the quotations."

The dark man half-evaded the question.

"I'm beginning to ask myself what I am in," he said. "I got so fed up with things to-day that I passed a couple of hours in a West End Cinema."

The fair man laughed outright at the confession.

"That's good!" he said. "I've done the same thing myself many a time. It takes your mind off the damned worry of it all—doesn't it?" He flourished the newspaper. "Nothing sensational in the news to-day," he said. "Just the morning paper stuff rehashed for the evening editions."

"I've stopped reading the newspapers," said the dark man. "It gives the mind a rest." He kept on unbuttoning and buttoning the lower part of his waistcoat as though he had spasms of breathlessness.

The fair man, without looking up from the newspaper, said testily:

"Who is this woman, 'La Lune'? They can't keep her name out of print."

The dark man had removed his silk hat and was mopping his forehead with a handkerchief.

"Do you mind if I turn off the heat?" he said, and pulled over the lever without waiting for a reply. "These damned antiquated railways either freeze you to death or stifle you with heat. . . . 'La Lune'? Oh, yes. The moon! Silver again! Ever noticed how evilly silver creeps into life?"

"I've never seen the woman," said the fair man, ignoring the last remark. "But I suppose I'm like everybody else who hasn't—crazy to see her."

"She must be enormously wealthy," said the dark man. "I see that she gave ten thousand to a Children's Hospital last week."

"Excellent advertisement," said the fair man. He smiled knowingly. "Did *she* give it? Or was it the fellow who——?"

"No doubt she has an 'angel' behind her."

"A pretty elusive one. I've never heard of him. If I could afford to run a luxury like that, I'd want to take her about with me."

"Is she in the paper to-night?" asked the dark man, listlessly.

"They toasted her at a regimental dinner," said the other: "it's become a fashion. She's the beauty of her age. She appeared at a ball the other night in a dress that was described as a sheath of pure silver studded with emeralds."

"Theatrical!" said the dark man. He looked again at the steam switch. His forehead was curiously white and wet.

"I understand that's where she came from—the stage," said the fair man. "Bickerson, the entrepreneur, knows his business. He may not supply good entertainment for the crowd, but he knows his market among the butter and egg men, as the Yanks call them. So long as they're ready to pay for the goods he can supply them. You know what I mean?"

"I suppose everybody knows about it, but who cares these days?"

"Bickerson is a clever man."

"I should call him a pimp if that's his line of business," said the dark man. "Did he supply 'La Lune'?"

"So they say."

"To whom?"

"I don't know. What does it matter? He pays out and she gives away. It keeps the money circulating. That's one way of looking at it. Rather wonderful her figure—what?" He indicated the photograph in the newspaper and turned the newspaper this way and that in order to get a different angle of vision. "Slim and sinuous as a—as a——"

"As a snake," said the dark man.

"Marvellous eyes!"

"Somebody must think so."

"Did you read of that undergrad. shooting himself after writing her a hopeless love-letter?"

"Young fool! The world is well rid of him."

"You couldn't blame 'La Lune'," said the fair man, defensively. "They tell me that she never encourages anybody. She's absolutely loyal to the man behind her—if there is one."

"There's always one—or more—behind a woman of that description."

The fair man wagged his head in protest.

"She's given a good deal to charity," he said.

The dark man pulled impatiently at the steam switch: the atmosphere of the compartment was stifling him.

"When a harlot gives to charity," he said, "it's like a bribe to the Almighty."

The fair man, who didn't appear to feel the heat, shrugged his shoulders.

"It's one of the oldest of the professions," he said facetiously, "and they tell me that it is being ruined by amateurs. We must try to be broad-minded in these days."

"It's difficult, sometimes," said the dark man, wearily. He rested his head against the cushions and stared at the electric bulb in the roof of the compartment. "Yes, we hear a lot about this woman, 'La Lune'," he said, rather bitterly. "I've wondered if the man behind her is the man behind the silver slump?"

"Not being in silver, I don't quite grasp the drift."

"The man who's hoarding silver—been buying silver for years?"

"If he's holding—if it's short—there shouldn't be a slump."

"There's a reason for everything in the silver market," said the dark man. "Do you mind if I open this window?"

The fair man nodded casually.

"He must be pretty substantial if he supports this lady," he said. "She gave a dinner at the Barlshire Hotel a few weeks ago and the newspapers figured the cost at eight thousand. Everybody who is anybody was there."

"That's the hell of it! These women control the world when you come to think of it. Right through history you can trace them—just as you trace a snake by the slime it leaves on the grass."

The train pulled up at an intermediate station. A third man entered and nodded indifferently to the dark man who was beginning to collect his belongings from the rack—a walking-stick, an attaché-case, a small paper parcel. He got out at the next stop.

Next morning, the fair man was travelling back to the City. The stranger who had got in at the intermediate station the previous evening was walking along the platform when he caught sight of him: he jumped into the compartment.

"I say! Barrowdaile was a friend of yours—wasn't he? Have you heard the news?"

"Barrowdaile? What news?" said the fair man.

"You travelled down with him last night. You were talking when I got into the train. I presumed that you were friends. Sorry! He—he shot himself last night in his study."

"You don't say! Barrowdaile? No, I didn't know his name, although I've seen him frequently during the last year or two. I thought he was a bit peppery in his remarks. What was he in?"

"Silver."

The fair man said: "Really!" and looked out of the window.

"I was at a card party, not far from his place, last night," said the other man. "The police whistle stopped the game, just when I was opening to a queen pot. Two of us went in to lend a hand."

"Family?" said the fair man.

"Three youngsters. The police had to take the wife away in an ambulance. Completely out of her mind."

"How sad!" said the fair man. "Likely looking fellow, too. Strange how the war seems to have knocked their nerve all to pieces. No guts left. Have you noticed it?"

The other man was looking at him intently.

"You had a near squeak," he said, and laughed. "Barrowdaile left a note saying he intended to do it in the train so as to draw attention to his grievance—injustice. You started another train of thought in his mind by mentioning silver; he wondered if you were in it and thought of taking you with him so as to make the 'noise' bigger."

"Very theatrical!" said the fair man, and shivered. "Poor me! What the devil had I to do with his affairs?"

"He was up against the Stradde people—Stradde, Hamshaw and Bleeker. He said in his note that he wanted to draw as much attention as possible to that firm."

"Michael Stradde! They're general merchants—aren't they? Where's the silver connection?"

"They were pressing him in another direction, I think, and he couldn't get rid of his silver holdings in order to satisfy their writ."

"Stradde, Hamshaw and Bleeker would be the last firm in the world to harass a man. They go back nearly a hundred and fifty years."

"I don't know anything about them."

"Silver—eh? This man—what's his name?—Barrowdaile, talked about silver."

"Funny—isn't it? There are more tragedies traceable to silver than to any other mineral."

"I've never looked at it in that way," said the fair man.

"Think about it for a while and it will strike you with force. Take China, for instance! Or India! It's the fight between the gold and silver standards that upsets the whole world of commerce."

"Silver!" the fair man mused. "Yes, I suppose there's something in what you say. Right through the ages!"

"Beginning, if you like, with Judas Iscariot."

"What? What? What's that?"

"You remember? Thirty pieces of silver! Judas and——"

"Oh! *That!*" The fair man looked at the window and blew out his cheeks. "Trifle stuffy in here this morning—isn't it?" he said.

The other man lowered the window to let in the air.

"We're running into a fog too," he said. "Extraordinary how you can see above it from this altitude!"

The fair man joined him at the window and looked over his shoulder.

"Lying like a blanket over London," he said.

"Like a silver shroud," said the other man.

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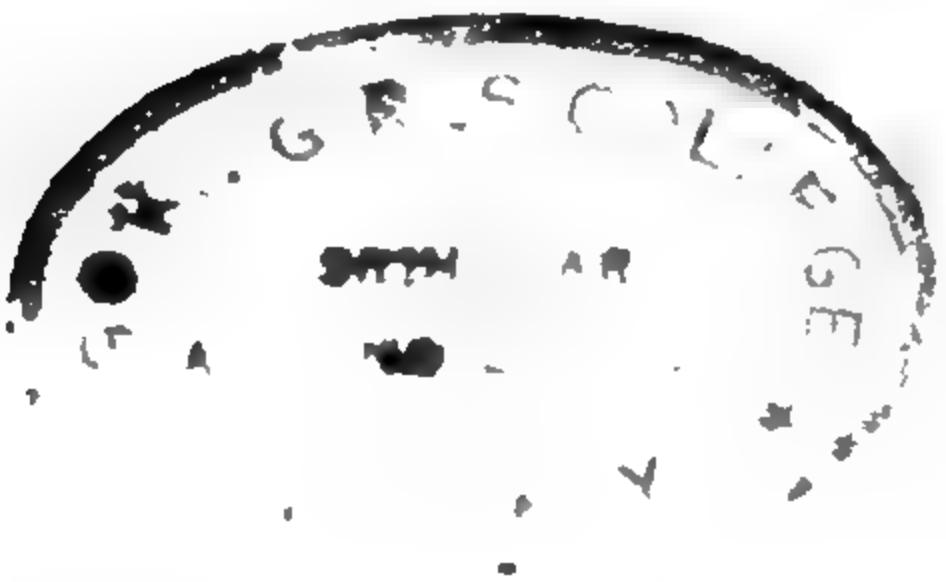

CHAPTER TWO

THE offices of Stradde, Hamshaw and Bleeker, General merchants, occupied four floors of Brakart Court Chambers. You might pass along crowded Bishopsgate and easily miss the narrow alleyway that led into the courtyard; once inside, the surprise would be to find so pretentious a building hidden away from the turmoil of the main thoroughfare, yet within twenty yards of it.

The conformation of the buildings appeared to have been designed to shut out noise and sky; in whichever part of the courtyard you might choose to stand there was bound to be some projection to prevent a clear view of clouds overhead: it was as though the architects had been enjoined to guard against inquisitive eyes—even those of aviators.

The only friendly touch given the façade of Brakart Court Chambers was by the flocks of City pigeons. They lined the window-sills and projections, fluttered and fought among themselves, preened their sooted feathers, looked through the windows at the imprisoned humans—the clerks—and even tapped with their beaks on the panes for the corn and scraps which they had come to regard as a daily tribute to their freer life.

More than a century ago, Brakart Court was the residence of Oscar Stradde, who had succeeded his father in the business and had his offices on the ground floor. The modern building was as a town to a village by comparison. It was equipped with every known improvement and facility. The whole of the ground floor was taken up by insurance brokers, ship owners and agents. The vast vestibule was illuminated by electric light throughout the day, but the sun itself might not

have dispelled the haunting gloom, the atmosphere of unfriendliness, of hard, bitter competition. Just beyond the stone stairway was a self-working electric lift, devoted solely to the needs of Stradde, Hamshaw and Bleeker and staff.

Gloomy vestibule! And yet the romance of the world might have been centred in those offices. The clerks who were continually entering and leaving the building might have betrayed a listlessness that wasn't indicative of an active organization, but it was there—Romance. The clerks took luncheon and played dominoes in the underground cafés of the neighbourhood; on the walls of their offices there were prints of tropical beach and sapphire blue seas; there were models of ships and photographs of ships. The tentacles of the Stradde organization touched lagoon and mountain peak, but for the unimaginative clerk that held no significance. For him there was greater thrill in catching the five-thirty train back to the suburb of an evening.

Perhaps it is well that fertile imagination is not given to everybody. Perhaps it is well that men should have different conceptions of Romance; for thus a balance is maintained. For instance, there was a very humble servant in the employ of Stradde, Hamshaw and Bleeker who came to be woven, unwittingly, into the tragedies that fell on the house. Tom Slater, simple, honest fellow, was the outdoor messenger; his weekly salary amounted to three pounds; he and his wife, Belinda, lived in two furnished rooms which they rented from a greengrocer named Potter—Nathaniel Potter, near Clapham Common. Tom Slater, jolly, whimsical little fellow, trickled through the life of Stradde the magnate in a curiously fatalistic way; he seemed to have been selected for the linking up of tragedy in its varied forms; he was the harbinger of good and evil—millions of capital was associated with the natural jester in a figurative sense and yet Tom Slater's idea of true Romance was a visit to a local cinema in the company of his stout voluble partner

in life. "The Pictures" held a foremost place in the heart of the little outdoor messenger. Even when, in fulfilment of his duties, he was dumping cheques and bills of money on the counters of the different banks—hundreds of thousands of pounds—he would be dwelling on film stars or "super-productions". The counter clerks, stamping and initialing the paying-in slips, were always interested in Slater's enthusiasm for the pictures.

The gloom in the vestibule of Brakart Court Chambers was more than usually depressing when Sir Gerald Greaves entered.

Two clerks were hurrying out of the buildings when he spoke to them.

"Stradde, Hamshaw—?" he said inquiringly, for he was not certain of the address.

One of the clerks jerked his head in the direction of the notice board on the wall of the vestibule, and followed his companion out. The gesture was eloquent. It said, in effect, "If the old fool with the grey hair and the worried look can read, why the devil does he take up the time of a busy clerk by asking stupid questions ?"

Of course it couldn't have been expected of a superman, but if that clerk had been able to think very deeply, and ask a few questions, and make a few deductions, he might have startled the whole world with the knowledge derived.

Sir Gerald Greaves was on his way to the office of Stradde, Hamshaw and Bleeker with the fixed determination to kill the senior partner if relief from mental torture were not forthcoming.

Sir Gerald was no more insane than the stockbroker who sits back in his chair twenty-four hours before settling day, and warns high heaven that unless a miracle happens before the appointed hour he may find it necessary to "take the knock" or a liberal dose of coal gas.

He was about fifty years of age. The baronetcy was

an old one, but its dignity had been severely handicapped by a sequence of financial misfortunes. The sequence began in Chile, South America, when Sir Gerald's late father first got into business communication with Michael Stradde. It would have been less hazardous to form an alliance with the devil himself.

After consulting the notice board, Sir Gerald climbed to the first floor. The gloom of the vestibule was replaced by something like opulence. It was like stepping from the steerage to the saloon in a liner. The floor of the hall was richly carpeted; there were genuine tapestries on the walls; the carved oak table in the centre of the floor held the current newspapers and periodicals. The commissionaire, sitting at a small oak table near the double doors leading into the central offices, was almost as impressive as his environment; his uniform was of military smartness; his eye was as keen as that of a sergeant major on the parade ground: he asked questions briskly as though time were money; yet he was courteous; he knew everybody in the office down to the youngest typist, yet he knew nobody. He was the best paid commissionaire in the City and he was worth every penny of his salary. If a homicidal maniac had tried to force his way into the office he would have found it necessary first to step over the dead body of the commissionaire. He guarded millions of pounds during the day, and after changing his uniform of an evening, he travelled home by bus to Peckham and sat with his heels on the hob, while he pondered the chances of his favourite football team.

"I'm very sorry, sir," said the commissionaire, studying Sir Gerald's card. "I fancy that Mr. Stradde is in conference with a deputation, but, if you will take a seat——"

The commissionaire spoke on the house telephone. All that Sir Gerald heard him say was: "Yes," "No," "Certainly, sir," but he didn't understand that a whole series of questions had been asked and answered.

"I thought so," he said to the weary-looking baronet, "but Mr. Grymdyke will see you immediately."

Sir Gerald sighed and nodded. He nursed his silk hat on his knee; it danced like a ridiculous doll.

Grymdyke, the confidential secretary of Michael Stradde, came into the reception hall. He greeted Sir Gerald effusively, and led the way into an ante-room.

"Tell me your business, Sir Gerald, and I'll do my utmost to make an appointment for you."

Sir Gerald wiped his damp forehead.

"I must see him alone, Mr. Grymdyke. The matter is so urgent that it cannot wait. To-morrow may be too late. You're familiar with the circumstances? This writ!"

"Mr. Stradde might be delighted to see you, but he hasn't sixty seconds to spare to-day."

"He's crushing me to death!"

"You're not quite yourself to-day, Sir Gerald. Let me fix an appointment——"

Sir Gerald closed his eyes in utter weariness. Then a burst of passion gave him new life.

"By God! I'll see him if I have to fight my way into his room," he said.

Grymdyke inclined his head as though he were acknowledging a compliment. He had heard this sort of thing so often.

"Let me have a cup of tea brought to you," he said persuasively, "and I'll see if one of the partners is free to receive you."

Sir Gerald became very old in that moment—much older than his fifty years. His thin lips twitched.

"My mind is so confused, Mr. Grymdyke," he said, rather brokenly. "So confused," he repeated, and looked vacantly around the room. "It is most—most distasteful to me to have to humble myself in this manner, but I'm desperate—my position is desperate. This writ means the end of everything."

"Come, Sir Gerald! You are not accustomed to

business methods—that's all. I dare say many of your friends will be only too delighted to come to your aid."

"I have no friends left," said the broken man. He added, after biting his nether lip. "Only my daughter, and she hasn't an inkling of the state of affairs. Stradde is out to kill me. Why shouldn't I kill him? His life is just as easy to take as mine."

"Would that help your daughter, Sir Gerald? Now, sit down and rest and I'll see Mr. Bleeker. I'm certain that he will be delighted to help."

"I wouldn't have believed that Stradde would have issued this writ. The debt wasn't mine in the beginning; I shouldered it after my father died, and through a foolish sense of pride in the family name, resolved to pay every cent."

"You may safely leave everything to Mr. Bleeker," said Grymdyke. "Sit down and glance through the papers while I see him." He went out.

Sir Gerald paced the floor; again and again he touched the pocket that held the weapon he had brought with him. He hated Stradde so intensely that he would thrill with joy as he emptied the revolver into him; and yet, if Stradde would exercise a little sympathy he would have no more sincere admirer! Surely, surely, Stradde would not risk his life for the few thousands that were at stake? It was all very well to quote platitudes about business being business and millionaires not being millionaires if they allowed sentiment to warp their judgment, but the circumstances were so extraordinary. Sir Gerald's father contracted the obligation. It was he who owned the silver mine in Chile, he who sold "forward", as they say, believing the agents' assurances that the fall in price would continue and that when the time came to deliver the silver he would make a further profit by buying in the open market. It was his father who sold the silver long before the date on which he was due to meet his obligations to Michael Stradde. Those agents had been so cocksure that the market would

continue to fall until rock bottom was reached. But the unexpected rise occurred. He didn't meet his obligations. He had committed a fraudulent action—it could be so construed. He couldn't provide the silver because he hadn't the means to buy at the new price. He died by his own hand, after committing to paper his curse on silver. And Sir Gerald, the son, had agreed to liquidate the debt! The price of silver had sagged since those days, but that made no difference to the original transaction. Michael Stradde, for some reason best known to himself, was inexorable. He had one answer to the appeals for leniency: "Pay that thou owest, or take the consequences." The writ was issued.

After leaving Sir Gerald, Grymdyke passed into the main offices. On that floor, an enormous counter ran right across the room. This was divided into compartments, with black and gold plates giving the name of each department. The upper floors were given over to the typists and book-keepers. And there was a Captains' Room, where the bronzed skippers waited to report the end and fruits of their voyage. The firm traded, as general merchants, in every part of the world; they turned over millions of pounds where other firms known as "eminent" turned over only thousands.

Mr. Jason Bleeker was the youngest of the three partners in the firm. He had charge of the shipping department. A nervous, irritable little man, this Bleeker. He was only about forty-five, but already the crown of his head was a pink and shiny disc. He listened fretfully to what Grymdyke had to say, then——

"Of course, he mustn't see Mr. Stradde. He ought not to have come here. Can't you get him away? Get on the phone to Quean and Tapp. They have charge of the matter. What are solicitors for if not to take this sort off our hands?"

"If you would see him for a moment, sir," said Grymdyke, "you might pacify him."

Mr. Bleeker touched the buzzer and spoke on the

house phone to Michael Stradde. The listening Grymdyke could hear distinctly the replies made by his chief.

"It's Greaves," said Mr. Bleeker. "Whining of course——"

"You see him!"

"What can we do for him?"

"Nothing."

"Grymdyke says he's desperate."

"So am I. Get him out of the building."

That was all. Mr. Bleeker, nervous and fretful, turned to the private secretary.

"I have to run along to Albemarle Street," he said. "I'll drive him back and talk to him. Tell him to wait."

Grymdyke felt relieved. He waited till Mr. Bleeker departed, then he went to the room of the chief. As he crossed the reception hall he ran into Tom Slater, the outdoor messenger. Merry Slater! Whimsical Slater! Inspiring Slater! Grymdyke was taken with a curious fancy. The laughing happy-go-lucky messenger represented a glassful of clean, spring water to a thirsty man who had sickened of the very smell of wine.

The room was large, but it didn't appear to be large enough for the head of the firm. The big frame of Michael Stradde seemed to be leaning over the massive oak writing desk rather than sitting before it. The square head was grey and closely-cropped. The jowl was heavy, the set of the lips vindictive; the eyes were remarkably small and he had a habit of half-closing them when he looked up from his papers. There was a small occasional table in each corner of the room; on each table was a soda-water siphon and glasses. When Stradde was dictating letters to a stenographer he walked from table to table and drank as though he couldn't hope to slake his thirst. He never touched intoxicants, but in the cupboard to the left of the door there were the choicest of wines and spirits. They were for "use" in business—when it was expedient to make a caller talkative—a simple, but a never-failing expedient.

Michael Stradde was a man of sixty-five, but his powerful frame had the elasticity of forty. He took considerable exercise although he insisted that he found sufficient in his work. At sixty-five, too, he hadn't lost pride in his personal appearance; he dressed with the meticulous care of a dandy—even on the writing-desk there was a small mirror held in position by the silver figure of a wood nymph—and it wasn't there merely to collect dust. Stradde was so impressed by his own reflection in the mirror that even in the presence of a stenographer he would stare at it now and then and smile appreciatively. The stenographer might say to herself: "Conceited old ass!" but his comments, also to himself, were entirely favourable.

As Grymdyke entered the room, Stradde reached for a cigar. He lit it carefully and the small eyes watched the private secretary through the cloud of smoke.

"I ordered the car for four-thirty," said Grymdyke.

Stradde indicated the code books on the desk before him.

Grymdyke locked them in the safe.

"Very quiet day, Grymdyke?"

"Yes, sir."

"Too quiet to suit my nerves. Ring up the house and tell them that Mr. Hamshaw is dining with me."

No reference was made to Sir Gerald Greaves, but Stradde was thinking of him. His hatred of the very name of Greaves was inherited.

"Mr. Hector telephoned from Tilbury during the lunch hour, sir."

"Indeed!" Stradde had begun to make rough calculations on the pad at his elbow.

Grymdyke was genuinely fond of Mr. Hector Farrar, the nephew of Mrs. Stradde. "Mr. Hector," as he was known to the staff, was an antidote to the City "poison".

"Did he say what sort of a trip he had?"

"No, sir. I think he was too delighted to be back to say much over the phone."

Michael Stradde nodded and smiled.

"Mr. Bleeker is sailing for South America shortly, Grymdyke. My nephew will take his room until we can fix up another for him."

"I gathered from Mr. Hector that he didn't expect to return to the office until next week."

"Really! I fancy he'll settle down to work immediately. He's been away twelve months! I haven't had a week's holiday during the last eight years."

"You look remarkably well on it, sir."

"Work is my idea of a holiday."

"Yes, sir. I know it is."

"Ring up the Cordenia Theatre and ask Mr. Bickerson to speak to me."

The connection was made. Grymdyke busied himself with letter files while the chief spoke to the theatre manager . . .

"Did you fix up that lease of the Hamlet Theatre? . . . Don't let them bluff you like that! We want the place for Marguerita but we're not going to pay through the nose. I'll buy the damned place rather than waste my time with these people. They have a seven years' lease at a hundred and twenty and have the nerve to ask us two-fifty a week! Bickerson, that's the type of parasite we've got to kill if the stage is to have a chance. . . . All right! Get it through. See that the little lady has a good Press to give her a start."

He hung up the receiver. The early editions of the evening newspapers were brought in. He gave them a hurried glance.

"You carried out my instructions about the Barrowdaile inquest, I see."

"Yes, sir," said Grymdyke calmly. "Quean and Tapp instructed Mr. Knightly to appear for us and watch our interests."

Stradde was reading the account of the inquest.

"Excellent speech," he said. "Quean knows his

job." He smiled grimly. "What damned liars these lawyers can be, Grymdyke, if the fee is good!"

"As you say, Mr. Stradde—liars!"

"See that the Press has details of the firm's gift to the widow."

"I've already attended to that, sir."

Stradde turned over the pages of the newspaper. Grymdyke stood by, hands slightly raised, his whole body ready to leap into action at the meanest command.

"Soda-water."

It was set before him. He gulped it down.

"Mr. Hamshaw wishes to see you before you go, sir."

"He's dining with me."

"He wants just a few minutes."

"All right."

The buzzer sounded. Grymdyke picked up the receiver. Without a word, he handed it to Stradde, then discreetly left the room. Stradde understood. He lay back in his chair, the better to enjoy the conversation!

And La Lune, the mystery woman of London, was lying on her couch the while she spoke.

"Speaking, dear," said Stradde. . . . "Not important? It must be when you ring me up at the office. Of course, you're forgiven. . . . Hum! Thirteen thousand seems a lot to give, but if you think it's worth it, go ahead. . . . I say! Mrs. Stradde's nephew, Hector, got back from a holiday to-day. You like Hector—don't you? I sent him a long trip to polish up the corners. He comes into the business for good. . . . Eh! I know you haven't met him, but you've heard me talk about him. . . . All right! Take care of yourself." He replaced the receiver.

Mr. Hamshaw came into the room. Hamshaw was a tall, slim, shrewd-looking man, perfectly groomed and ever conscious of his importance to the world of finance. He had been associated with Stradde for many years and his was a much stronger character than that of Bleeker. Outside the office, and especially in the

neighbourhood of his Surrey estates, Hamshaw was somewhat a potentate.

"Couldn't it wait till after dinner ?" Stradde asked.

Hamshaw replied by drawing a chair to the writing-desk so that he could face Stradde.

"Bleeker's out," he said. "Let's have a look at the situation ! To-day's highest was 37⅜. Compare that with two years ago !"

Michael Stradde helped himself to a soda-water.

"Who the devil's been frightening you ?" he asked, harshly. "Bleeker, I suppose ?"

"I haven't spoken three words to him this morning, but I know what's in his mind," said Hamshaw. "How long can we keep this up ? We're holding more silver to-day than——"

"I know we are." Stradde smiled pityingly at his partner. "And we're going to hold more." He passed a cablegram across the desk. "That's the latest from Loewenstein," he said curtly. "If you and Bleeker are getting cold feet, I'll buy you out to-morrow, but don't whine afterwards."

"Let's talk calmly," said Hamshaw, with dignity. Even to talk of "buying out" his partners was a sign of mental weakness in Stradde.

"You exhaust my patience when you show funk in this matter."

Hamshaw persisted he was not without moral courage, but there had been occasions of late when he had looked around his Surrey estate and wondered what it would feel like to be deprived of it. Stradde dreamed of cornering the silver of the world and he was disposed to gamble with every asset the firm possessed in order that the dream should materialize.

"We're holding so much silver, that the loss of interest on capital is staggering," he said.

"You mean that *I'm* holding it, Hamshaw. The whole of my personal fortune is in it apart from my interests in the firm."

"The agents have been buying heavily again to-day."

"Loewenstein acted on my instructions."

"And the price is dropping steadily."

"It will go up again, Hamshaw." The small eyes blazed. "Look here! I first saw the possibilities of silver in 1913. The price then was twenty-five and fifteen-sixteenths per ounce. I bought because I believed, not only in silver, but in myself. I saw it go up to eighty-nine and a half. You and Bleeker would have sold at that figure if it hadn't been for me. I know it will touch a hundred." He struck the desk a resounding blow with his clenched hand. "And I'm going to hold on until it does," he said.

Hamshaw made no reply. He stared gloomily at the desk.

Stradde got up from his chair and settled his coat more comfortably about his shoulders.

"I want to control the silver of the world, Hamshaw," he said. "That's what I've been fighting for since 1913. The profit I'm aiming at is between twenty and thirty millions! Think of that when you're inclined to shout 'quit'. When you're gambling for a profit as big as that you've got to hold on tight to your courage."

"There seems to be no checking the fall," said Hamshaw obstinately. "It will go to rock bottom. They all say so."

"I don't pay the slightest heed to their pessimism," said Stradde. "Watch the political situation and you'll keep abreast of the market. Silver was down to 'twenty-six' when I went into it. And it didn't take me long to discover that of all gambles silver is the most profitable if you have your wits about you. Up and down it goes! Anything may happen. Silver controls the world if you would but realize it. And just so long as you have the two standards, gold and silver, there will always be the chance of something tremendous happening."

"Yes, yes," said Hamshaw, a little wearily. He had

heard Stradde rave so often that the very mention of silver sapped his strength.

Stradde could read the other's mind.

"Oh, I know," he said irritably. "You think I've got silver on the brain. Sometimes I fancy you're clever, Hamshaw; then, again, I think you're no wiser than any clerk in the office. I've heard you talk of the possibility of China or India going over to the gold standard. They would have to pay for the gold. I suppose you'll grant that much." He swung around to the soda siphon and drank greedily. "Silver absolutely controls three-quarters of the world's commerce, Hamshaw. And when it goes to a hundred—I'll control everything! That's all we need say about it to-day."

Hamshaw realized the futility of arguing further. Stradde was in one of his arrogant moods; so to speak doubtfully of his obsession was to incur his contempt. He was so convinced that the price would yet go to a hundred pence per ounce that he hated anyone who dared to doubt it.

That day Hamshaw had lunched with an astute government official who had said just sufficient to start a new train of thought in Hamshaw's mind. The fluctuations in the price of silver affected commerce to a marked degree. When it was down to (say) thirty it meant that no country with the silver standard could afford to trade with a country that recognized the gold standard. Silver was only worth a third of its par value so that silver-controlled countries had to pay three times as much for imported goods.

The government official had hinted at many possibilities that would affect the price of silver. There was the threat of a strike by the Triple Alliance. There were bound to be amazing fluctuations in Eastern, American and Continental exchanges. The collapse of the German mark exchange would have influence all over the world, especially in the East. Waiting for silver to rise to a hundred was, in Hamshaw's opinion, the folly of a

visionary who had no rightful place in the world of logical business. He estimated that Stradde and the firm between them were holding five or six millions' worth of silver—hoarding it in the hope of sending up the price. The lost interest on the money was too terrible to contemplate, but Stradde was so insistent, so ready with mind pictures of colossal wealth to try to reason with him. They were in silver right up to their necks.

Perhaps, thought Hamshaw, Stradde was right in protesting that they couldn't slacken without losing the fight. Better to battle on in the belief that victory was in sight. Buy, buy, buy, was the order to every one of their agents and every "parcel" acquired was either a nail in their coffin or the hoisting of their flag a little nearer the masthead.

Hamshaw wished he had a little of the Stradde courage and especially Stradde's faculty for finding mental relief in other phases of life. Extraordinary fellow, Michael Stradde, he thought, as he watched the chief reach for his hat and dustcoat. He had half a dozen personalities and was sincere in each one. His home life was quiet and uneventful; Mrs. Stradde was a silent, submissive woman apparently devoid of ambition, social snobbery, emotion. She passed from day to day with the monotonous regularity of sun, moon and stars. She entertained in a very minor way and was obviously relieved when anything like a function in the Stradde town house was over. They had a magnificent place in the country, but she saw no beauty in it. She took everything for granted. She suggested to Hamshaw's mind a woman standing on a deserted railway platform waiting for a train that would never come in, knowing it would never come in, yet waiting and waiting because there was nothing else to do save wait. She appeared to take no interest in her husband's work and ambition. If the men talked at dinner she sat like a stone image, a smile frozen on her face, a far-away look in her eyes.

Hamshaw often told himself that if Mrs. Stradde were made aware of her husband's other modes of life it would make no difference to her attitude. In truth, he wasn't what the vulgar term a "womaniser", but he appeared to joy in the knowledge that he had the power, through his wealth, to be one if he so desired. He was more conceited than immoral; his was a type of mind that would go to any extreme to bring about the surrender of a woman, and, the moment she surrendered, lose its keenness and turn away in search of fresh stimulant.

Between Stradde and his wife there was no apparent bond of physical affection. To him she was no more than a housekeeper; to her, he was no more than Michael Stradde who had changed her name and paid well for the privilege.

There was only one person in the world who appeared capable of arousing human instincts in the grey-haired woman, and that was her nephew, Hector, now returning from a world tour to take his place in the office of Stradde, Hamshaw and Bleeker. She was fond of Hector, almost maternal in her attitude towards him. She had been fond of his father before him—Joseph Farrar—a much esteemed merchant of the City of London. Hector reminded Hamshaw of the father. There was the same massive frame, the same boyish spirits, light-blue eyes, generous appreciation of those around him, wholesome regard for all the ethics by which Society is guided. Hector had served a couple of years in the office already; Michael Stradde had urged him to take the long trip for "polish"; Hamshaw knew that there was something else behind it all. . . l

"I shall expect you at seven-thirty," said Stradde to Hamshaw. "I'm hoping that the boy will be in time for dinner, but we shan't wait for him."

He left the office. Hamshaw went back to his own room. Grymdyke came to him.

Mr. Bleeker has been through on the phone, sir,"

he said. "I fancy he has had rather an anxious time with Sir Gerald Greaves."

"Did Mr. Bleeker want me ?" said Hamshaw.

"No, sir. He said he understood that you were dining with Mr. Stradde, and he might look in during the evening."

"Thanks, Grymdyke. You saw Sir Gerald—didn't you ? What was his object in coming here ?"

"He was somewhat distressed."

Mr. Hamshaw nodded indifferently. He watched Grymdyke walk to the door, then called him back.

"How long have you been with us now ?" he asked in a pleasant tone of voice.

"With the firm ? Thirty years, Mr. Hamshaw."

"Remarkable ! Mr. Stradde thinks highly of you, Grymdyke, but I suppose you know that ?"

"It is pleasing to hear it from you, sir."

"Tell me—what do you think of his health ?"

"Extraordinarily good, I should say."

"He didn't see Sir Gerald this afternoon ?"

"No, sir."

"Thanks to you, I suppose."

"I didn't think it advisable that Sir Gerald should see him, sir."

"Has he been here often ?"

"Not to my knowledge, sir."

"He has a daughter—hasn't he ? Am I mistaken or am I right in believing that she has been here ?"

Grymdyke knew that he was being cross-examined, and he wished to be loyal to Stradde. Even to a junior partner he wasn't disposed to betray his trust.

"If she has called, sir, her name would be in the book," he said.

Mr. Hamshaw looked at him sternly.

"I'm asking these questions with a view to protecting Mr. Stradde against any possible annoyance," he said. "Perhaps I can get the information from the commissionaire. Do you understand, Grymdyke ?"

"Perfectly, sir."

"Speak frankly, then."

"I believe that Sir Gerald's daughter called here on two occasions."

"To see— ? It's important, Grymdyke ?"

"To see Mr. Hector, sir," said Grymdyke, and he was painfully confused.

"Is Mr. Michael Stradde aware of this ?"

"I don't think so."

"You appreciate, of course, that Mr. Hector is very young and inexperienced. The last thing an experienced man of business would do would be to countenance the visit of—of a lady friend."

"I suppose you are right, sir."

"Has Mr. Hector ever spoken to you about her—this lady ?"

"No, sir. At least——"

"Did she call with the object of discussing her father's position so far as it may be affected by his dealings with this firm ?"

"No, sir. I—I cannot very well explain myself, but I'm certain that the young lady knows nothing about her father's affairs. Sir Gerald is a gentleman who would keep everything from his family."

"Then, why did she call, Grymdyke ? And why are you so reluctant to remember that I am a partner in this firm, and might know of a score of excellent confidential secretaries only too eager to take a position here ? Why did she call here to see Mr. Hector ?"

"To be frank, sir, although it is no more than surmise, I fancy that she and Mr. Hector are rather fond of each other."

Mr. Hamshaw arched his eyebrows.

"All right, Grymdyke," he said. "We'll leave it at that."

When Grymdyke had left, Hamshaw walked up and down the office floor, his hands thrust into his trousers pockets.

"This is going to complicate things if it isn't dropped immediately," he thought. He wondered how much Hector knew of the secrets of the firm. He didn't like Hector; he didn't like the type: it was the type from which very good persons sprang—or very bad and dangerous revolutionaries. Michael Stradde might be a very shrewd man of business, but Hamshaw felt that he had allowed the nephew rather more rope in that office than was good for them all. There was an irritating fear in Hamshaw's mind that uncanny shadows were beginning to creep from the corners of the office of Stradde, Hamshaw and Bleeker. Silver grey shadows! Ghosts!

And for the first time in his life Hamshaw was decidedly afraid of ghosts.

CHAPTER THREE

MICHAEL STRADDE wasn't in the habit of leaving his office so early in the day; frequently he stayed there for hours after the general staff was gone. He drove to the Cordenia Theatre, instructed the chauffeur to wait in the nearest "park", but added that he would not be more than half an hour. He entered the theatre by the main entrance and went upstairs to the office of Bickerson, the manager. He knocked at the door but didn't wait for a response—just walked straight in. A booking-clerk, on his way downstairs, recognized the giant figure and wished that he had time to get back to Bickerson and give the warning.

This was always done tactfully, because Mr. Bickerson didn't like the obvious. The booking-clerk would have said "Mr. Michael wishes to see you, sir," and that would have been sufficient for Bickerson to put his house in order before the chief patron and play backer reached the office door.

In the circumstances, on this late afternoon, there was no opportunity given the booking-clerk, so he abandoned the master to his fate and joined a colleague in the pay-box. They conversed with deference to the importance of Bickerson and the dignity of the profession as a whole.

"Did you give 'em the wire upstairs that *he* was in the house?"

"Is he? I didn't see him come in. I was busy with early bookings."

"Like hell you were!" The clerk who had come downstairs indicated the evening newspaper which had fallen to the floor. "Looking out the winner at Haydock, I suppose. There'll be merry hell when he's gone."

She took the cigarette from between her lips and smiled enchantingly.

"And they say dreams don't come true!" she purred.

Michael Stradde did no more than smile back and press the little hand she raised towards him. He gave the rest of the company a swift appraising glance, then turned and nodded a greeting to Bickerson.

Bickerson was dusting the cigarette ash from his coat; his face was red with embarrassment; he frowned at a brunette in the corner who was tightening a suspender; then he recovered himself sufficiently to place a chair in position for Michael Stradde.

"We've been running through the new piece," he said nervously. "That desert scene ought to reach right out across the footlights and get the people."

"Make them thirst for more," said Stradde, facetiously. He glanced significantly at the empty glasses on the table and mantelshelf.

Bickerson made a sign to the girls behind Stradde; they began to get to their feet. Marguerite remained seated: she appeared to joy in the privilege that was undoubtedly hers.

"Rehearsals begin almost immediately," said Bickerson to the crowd. "You will be notified in the usual way." He held open the door. "Good afternoon."

"Stradde bowed perfunctorily as they moved out of the room. Bickerson closed the door, came back to the desk, and said:

"I'll get the draft lease of the Hamlet out of the safe, sir. I'd like you to see it." The safe was in a small, box-like room adjoining the private office. He didn't wish to discuss the lease, but he was aware that Michael Stradde appreciated tactfulness and a little privacy.

Marguerite reached across and rested a hand on Stradde's. She was a fascinating little creature, whatever her acting abilities might be. The tight-fitting green felt hat was in complete harmony with the corn-coloured curls that looked furtively from under the

edge of the hat; her eyes were china-blue, but not vacuous as blue eyes generally are; her features were small and exquisitely fashioned; her voice was rather throaty, but the throatiness only added to the charm of her personality.

"I wonder why you should do all this for me," she said softly.

"I wonder?" he said, playfully, and patted her hand.

"It must be costing you a fortune?"

"I am content. You wanted your chance, and I felt that I could give it you. That's all we need say about it."

She surveyed him lazily, wonderingly; perhaps the wine had made her romantic, even stagey.

"And you don't ask anything in return?" she said, and sighed.

Bickerson came back into the room. He had overheard the last remark; he gave her a warning glance, for he knew the temperament of his patron; and he knew that the difference between art and mediocrity is restraint. Very tactfully he reminded Marguerite of an appointment she must keep with the photographer. She said good-bye to Michael Stradde and prepared to leave.

"Get a taxi," Stradde said curtly to Bickerson. He didn't offer the use of his own car; that was the last thing he would do.

Bickerson phoned down to the front of the house.

Marguerite held out a hand to Stradde: she looked at him with something like awe in her eyes. She might have been saying to herself that she had taken too much for granted; she had jeopardized the chance of a lifetime.

"Sometimes—sometimes I'm afraid of you," she said in a half-whisper.

It was the finest tribute she could have paid him. And Bickerson felt relieved. He knew that love of

power transcended all other emotions in Michael Stradde: it was all that great wealth could give men.

For a moment, Marguerite remained standing in front of Stradde. There might have been invitation in the parting of her lips but he gave no sign that he was conscious of it. She couldn't understand—her type never would understand—that men who have given their very soul to the accumulating of money and think in millions when others are concerned with pounds, do not invest sexuality with half the romance a city clerk might apply to it. For them, the female is no more than a diversion that may grant the relaxation of which it may stand in need. They worship money, and the last thing that might occur to them would be to supplant the idol with an empty-headed vainglorious woman.

"I should love to convince you that I do appreciate all you have done for me," she said, and dared to raise her arms and rest her hands on his shoulders.

"You can do that," he said, and not unkindly, "by applying yourself to your work instead of ruining your health in a manager's office by drinking cheap wine and smoking cheap cigarettes."

It might have been the devil rebuking sin, but she accepted the rebuke without showing temper.

From the theatre, Michael Stradde drove to his house in Grosvenor Crescent. He sat back in the limousine, a newspaper in his hands, but he didn't read: he didn't see the print, nor the people in the street, nor the buildings. The brain that had found a moment's respite at the theatre was grappling again with the dream of a lifetime.

Silver! Silver! Silver! Control of the world's silver! The power of a hundred potentates vested in one man! Power to dictate to all humanity! The power of a thousand Pharaohs with a million granaries filled from floor to roof!

The chauffeur stepped down and opened the door

of the limousine. He arched his eyebrows, mutely asking the question:

"You've been on duty since nine this morning—haven't you, Frederick?"

"Yes, Mr. Stradde."

"Then it's time you had a rest. Instruct Payton to stand by."

"Very good, sir."

The chauffeur's loyalty was strengthened. Stradde's character was made the more perplexing. At a moment when his mind was grappling with a stupendous problem he could be considerate towards his chauffeur. And it was genuine thoughtfulness—not affectation or casualness. Indeed, as he reached the top step leading to the hall door, he turned, and said:

"If you have nothing better to do to-night, Frederick, take your wife to the theatre. See Mr. Bickerson and ask him to fix you up."

Stradde let himself into the house. A footman awaited him in the hall—he had heard the limousine stop and was aware that the master had returned, but he was aware also of the characteristics and peculiarities of Michael Stradde, who hated anything like ceremonial in the conduct of the household. He asked the footman:

"Has Mr. Hector arrived?"

"Not yet, sir," said the manservant. "He is expected within an hour."

Stradde glanced at the letters on the hall table.

"Bring them up to the study," he said curtly, and went upstairs.

No reference to his wife. She was taken for granted. No doubt she was sitting in her accustomed place in the drawing-room, an unopened novel on her knee, one hand on the arm-rest of her chair, one foot on the footstool, the whole attitude that of a woman awaiting a summons and ready to rise instantly from her chair.

She had been sitting like that for thirty years; she had become part of the furniture in the room; she had

aged with the furniture, had become duller, duller, heavier, more sombre— So he thought at times, without being unduly disturbed by the thought.

If she spoke, her own voice reproached her: the furniture roused itself from sleep, sighed, and went to sleep again. Servants entered the room and passed out of it again without appearing to notice the grey-haired woman with the beautiful eyes.

She was always there, growing old there, waiting patiently for—what? The servants didn't care: they were not paid their wages to offer her an expression of solicitude even if they thought she might be the better for it. Her clothes were in harmony with her environment—old-fashioned, mid-Victorian, redolent of lavender petals. Her head, lace-capped, was held slightly to one side, listening! Always listening! She couldn't have said for what. Her years were not so many as Stradde's, but she was infinitely older in appearance. His feverish activity in the City kept him youthful in step and poise. He hadn't time to grow old. Nerves and sinews had been kept aquiver: they were like the pistons and bearings of the well-made cars he used—old, but good, and kept in perfect tune.

The house in Grosvenor Crescent would not have struck the casual observer as being imposing or the residence of a reputed millionaire. From the outside it suggested no more than a Georgian building that had its equal in a hundred other streets and squares of the West End.

The interior was as roomy as a palace and with all the magnificence of a palace, save the atmosphere of rest and comfort. It was too quiet, too horribly quiet to be restful to the nerves: ghosts seemed to be lying in wait, preparing to stalk the corridors, to speak—to cry out: "Come along, the tomb is ready!"

Yet Michael Stradde must have spent a hundred thousand pounds on that house. If there was no sense of art in his being, he could afford to buy the art that

was in others. His money said: "Give me the best and I'll pay for it," but there was no appreciation of that which it bought. Stradde's mind was too loyal to its obsession to concern itself with the magnificent Jacobean lounge hall or the Georgian dining-room. (He preferred the atmosphere of the office in Brakart Court Chambers.) The Adam drawing-room, where his wife sat in silence, was something he had countenanced because it was supposed to be the right thing to do. There was a ball-room in the Georgian style, but Stradde himself couldn't have recalled any dance that he had given. An oriel and balustraded balcony overlooked the room and formed the musicians' gallery. Not even the ghost of a musician had ever been seen in the gallery. In truth, the only luxuries in the marvellously embellished house that were appreciated by Stradde were the bathroom and the swimming pool. The floor of the bathroom was paved with Sicilian marble and the walls were faced with variegated marble, formed into panels. The swimming pool was a triumph of luxury in a town house. It measured thirty-six feet by seventeen. Doric columns stood at each corner of the pool. Stradde was proud of this swimming pool; friends were taken upstairs to admire it, but he and his wife's nephew were almost the only persons to make use of it.

Michael Stradde's study was almost a replica of that at the office in Brakart Court Chambers. When he left the City of a late afternoon, he locked his door there and, figuratively, opened it again when he reached the Grosvenor Crescent House. It was a large, even spacious room, with the writing-desk set in the centre of the floor. As in the City office, there were occasional tables in every corner and on each a soda-water siphon and glasses. Telephones were on desk, wall and mantelshelf: tape machines were near the window that looked out on the back of the premises. In an adjoining room, Stradde kept two huge safes, but little else save a centre table, and chairs and books relating

to finance. On one wall hung a large map of the world with Stradde's markings all over it. He may not have travelled far, but he had his finger on every spot that was concerned with silver and trade in silver.

On this late afternoon, Stradde passed from the study to the adjoining room, gave the place a quick, appraising glance, and went back to the writing-desk. For some reason he couldn't define, he was conscious of a feeling of nervousness. He might have called it apprehensiveness. Again and again he looked up from the desk as though he suspected some article of having moved while his head was lowered. Once, he had said, half-jestingly to a partner, that the only thing he suffered from was "presentiment". He meant that long before a happening occurred, he sensed its coming and was restless and impatient in consequence. He was suffering from it now, but he hadn't his nephew, Hector, in mind.

The buzzer on the desk sounded. The footman, in accordance with custom, advised him from the hall of the arrival of a visitor.

Mr. Hamshaw had called, and it was imperative that he should see the chief without delay!

Hamshaw! What was the cause of his coming to Grosvenor Crescent so early? He had been invited to dinner, and should be down in his country seat in Surrey; he had said there was something to attend to down there and he would have plenty of time to motor down and return at the appointed hour.

Stradde admired Hamshaw in many respects; he contemned him in others. Hamshaw had been twice married: Stradde could never find it in his heart to forgive a man anything *twice*. The second wife was young and feather-brained. She knew how to spend her husband's money, but she didn't understand why he should pass so much time in the City making it. She would like Hamshaw to retire from business and help her to waste the fortune he had made. He had conveyed

to her the impression that he owed a great deal to Michael Stradde, so she hated Stradde accordingly.

Hamshaw was admitted to the study. He looked about him nervously.

Stradde scrutinized the flushed face and excited eyes and took a firm grip of himself in consequence. It was characteristic of him to take to himself an access of courage whenever either, or both, of his partners showed signs of wavering. There were times when he fancied that Hamshaw lacked backbone: he didn't think so now: he knew that his own presentiment during the day had been well-founded.

"Well?" he said, in feigned calmness, "has the wife eloped with your secretary?"

"Has Hector returned?" Hamshaw asked.

"No. Is he the cause of this early appearance?"

"No and yes." Hamshaw's forehead was damp. "I've just heard from Bleeker," he said.

"Where? On my doorstep?"

"It will be here before long." He wiped his forehead with a handkerchief.

Stradde frowned and snapped his fingers irritably.

"Come on! Out with it! What the devil has put the wind up you? There's nothing come in from Loewenstein?"

Hamshaw shook his head after the manner of a boxer recovering from a knock-out blow.

"Bleeker managed to phone to me from the Matador Club. You know that Greaves came to the office to-day?"

"Sir Gerald does many things for which I should say he is unaccountable."

"He threatens to take his life."

The thin lips turned in a sneer.

"Am I Sir Gerald's keeper?"

Hamshaw was blunt and direct.

"You are determined to issue the writ?" he said, in the tone of one who says: "I'll give you another chance to reconsider your decision."

"Damnation, Hamshaw, have you come here to disturb me by pleading the case of that whining cur ?"

"I think he will take his life."

"Let him ! The world won't be any the poorer."

"Bleeker is certain that he will."

"So long as he has the decency not to do it in my office, I have no objection to his committing suicide. What's Bleeker doing with him in his Club ?"

"He had to get him away from the office this afternoon. He took him to the Club to try to talk him into a reasonable frame of mind."

Michael Stradde stopped in his restless pacing of the floor.

"Why come to worry me with all this ?" he asked. "I invited you to dinner so that we might have a quiet hour together. If I paid any attention to all the spineless fools who threaten to commit suicide or assassinate me, I shouldn't have time to take a bath. Greaves is a very small atom in my operations."

"I'm afraid you'll alter your opinion in a moment," said Hamshaw, daringly. "His death at this juncture might bring about all manner of difficulties—personal to yourself, I mean."

Stradde was rude in his indignation.

"Don't sit there vapouring," he said. "Why have you come here so early this evening ? You began by asking if Hector had returned, then you started to plead for Greaves. Good God ! You've seen a dozen of the fools go to their grave without batting an eyelash. Why this solicitude in behalf of this one ?"

"Do you know that your nephew Hector is practically engaged ?"

"It's the first I've heard of it," said Stradde. "To whom ?"

"The daughter of Sir Gerald Greaves," said Hamshaw, lowering his voice. "His only daughter, Felice."

Michael Stradde's reception of the news took the

other man by surprise. The lines of the financier's face seemed to become deeper: possibly that was due to the inhaling of the breath with the lips tightly compressed in rage.

"The swine!" he said at last.

"Not Hector?"

"No, Greaves! The scheming swine! He thought he could trade on this."

"Bleeker says that is not so."

"Bleeker's an idiot—a sentimental idiot. Did you say he phoned you that he was coming here?"

"He phoned from the Club. He said Greaves was insisting on coming to see you."

"Bringing the daughter with him?"

"No. According to Bleeker's story, the girl hasn't the faintest idea that her father has had business relations with you. Bleeker is afraid that unless you consent to see the poor devil you may have a tragedy on your doorstep. You don't want any scandal of that sort."

The buzzer on the desk interrupted.

Bleeker and Sir Gerald Greaves had arrived!

Michael Stradde smiled cynically.

"Show them up," he said to the footman. He walked to the soda siphon with measured yet lazy gait and drank a glassful at a gulp. He looked at the blinking Hamshaw. He contemned him for his weakness. He would show him, once and for all time, how to handle these would-be suicides who regained their courage the instant after they had successfully evaded their responsibility.

Mr. Bleeker, the junior partner, came in; he nodded rather wearily to Hamshaw, in the manner of one who would say: "I've had the devil's own job."

Sir Gerald Greaves followed him in and stared rather wildly from face to face. To Hamshaw and Bleeker it was patent that the victim's reason was swaying over the edge. His eyes appeared incapable of focusing properly: he lurched to a chair and sat down heavily without waiting to be invited. He leaned forward

and drummed with his fingers on the edge of the oaken writing-desk.

Bleeker took a seat near the window and wiped his wet forehead with a handkerchief.

"What's all this damned silly play-acting about, Greaves ?" said Stradde in a harsh, brutal tone of voice.

The wretched man raised his head and stared, but although he opened his lips no sound came from them.

"I don't know why I agreed to see you," Stradde went on. "I haven't the time to see and listen to every Tom, Dick and Harry who want to escape their just debts."

Sir Gerald's face was pitiable.

"Give me a chance, Mr. Stradde," he managed to say. "My brain is all muddled—dazed."

"Why should I single you out for favours ?"

"That writ ?"

"Stands," said Michael Stradde fiercely. "And I don't think any more of you for moping around London like a spoilt child."

Sir Gerald looked at the other partners and smiled—a strange, vacuous smile.

Stradde's face was wicked in its expression. In the course of his career he had tackled scores of situations similar to this one, but he had never been so bitter and vindictive. The other victims had shown fight and a little manliness.

Again the buzzer sounded.

Long afterwards, Bleeker reflected that there was something human in the sound—a plea for mercy.

Stradde snatched viciously at the instrument.

"Well ?" he said.

Hector, his nephew, had returned from abroad ! He was downstairs with his aunt. And the daughter of Sir Gerald Greaves was with him ! Could they come up to the study to see him ? Or would he prefer that they wait till he went downstairs ?

A ticklish situation. He was quick to realize that.

He couldn't get rid of Sir Gerald without a scene. Besides, there were many things that he wished to say to him—many humiliating things. He answered:

"I'll see them here in two or three minutes." As he uttered the word "them" he smiled sinisterly. He turned to Bleeker. "Take Sir Gerald into the next room for a few moments," he said. "My nephew is coming up." He himself opened the door leading into the next room.

Bleeker shook Sir Gerald by the shoulder to rouse him from the semi-stupor into which he appeared to have lapsed. The haggard face was twitching peculiarly. The two men passed into the adjoining room and the door was closed.

Michael Stradde crossed the floor of the study and was helping himself to more soda-water when the dreadful thing happened.

The muffled report of a revolver shot caused Stradde to drop his glass on the floor: it broke into a thousand fragments.

Hamshaw, who had just taken a cigar from his case, leaped to his feet and stared in a horrified manner at Stradde.

The door of the next room was thrown open and Bleeker, cheeks blanched and eyes rounded by terror, stumbled into the study.

"He's done it!" he said, and gasped for breath. "Oh, my God! He's done it! Shot himself through the heart! I warned you, I warned you! Oh, God! I couldn't stop him!"

There came a knock at the study door. It was a masonic knock that was always employed by the laughing, chaffing Hector when he came upstairs to have a chat with his uncle.

"Shut up!" Stradde whispered to the jabbering Bleeker. "Close that door! Turn the key in the lock! . . . Hamshaw, move your chair to the door and sit there. Don't let anyone pass you. . . . That's Hector

at the other door. I'm going to let him in. . . . Bleeker, you damned coward, pull yourself together. . . . Have a cigar. . . . Here! I'll light it for you. . . . Stop your shaking. . . . Ready, Hamshaw?"

Stradde, in any other circumstances than these, would have been magnificent in his power to simulate calm. He walked to the door opening on the corridor and unlocked it.

Acc, No - 111

CHAPTER FOUR

THE drama of that moment when Hector—tall, manly, laughter-loving Hector—came into the room accompanied by the woman he hoped to make his wife, strained to breaking-point the nerves of both Hamshaw and Bleeker. It had no more effect on Michael Stradde than a gust of wind on an iceberg. Drama, for him, had no significance: he was inured to shocks of this description: he thought of suicides as fools who lacked courage, fools the world could well do without.

Hector, bronzed and boisterous, strode quickly over the floor and grasped the hand of his uncle.

Felice, delicate of form, timid in the presence of the men in the room, seemed to shelter behind the huge form of her lover: the round blue eyes held an expression of intense happiness: she might have been saying to herself: "Once I have made the acquaintance of Hector's uncle, I know that I shall win my way to his heart."

"Hello, Uncle! It's good to see you again." Hector was too full of his own joy to mark the nervousness of the partners. "I hope I haven't butted into a business conference."

Stradde's voice was wonderfully controlled as he replied:

"Glad to see you, Hector! Had a good trip?"

"Wonderful trip, Uncle."

"We were in the middle of a business problem." He looked at Felice: there was a frown on his face.

"This is Felice, Uncle," said Hector, cheerfully. "I know it may come as a surprise to you, but—well, I wanted to keep it a surprise until I got back. And I

knew that you had a year of business worries and didn't want to be put out of your stride, as it were. Felice and I have kept the whole thing quiet until to-day. Even her father doesn't know of it yet."

"Really!" said Stradde, still cold and forbidding.

"Her father—Sir Gerald Greaves," said Hector, rather checked in his exuberance by the tone of his uncle's voice. "I've heard you speak of him, haven't I?"

"You must have heard me speak of many men, Hector." Stradde shook hands with Felice in a perfunctory manner and looked again at his partners. Bleeker, standing near his chair, was white-faced and trembling. Stradde compressed his lips savagely. The impulse was to stride across the floor and shake the poltroon by the shoulders. A partner! Bah! He hadn't the courage of a schoolgirl in the presence of a mouse. He turned again to Hector.

"Your happiness seems to have affected your manners, my boy," he said, in the tone of a mentor. "You haven't spoken to my partners."

Hector laughed at his own remissness.

"Give me a chance," he said, and swung around to Hamshaw. "How are you, Mr. Hamshaw? Missed me at the office? Say yes. Hang it, I like a little flattery as well as anyone else."

They shook hands.

"Yes, we've missed you," said Hamshaw, wondering what was likely to happen when the smashing blow was dealt at the beautiful girl by Hector's side. "Glad to have you safely back," he added, mechanically.

"And you, Mr. Bleeker?" Hector had grasped the hand of the shaking Bleeker. "You're not looking so fit as when I went away, Mr. Bleeker. What's wrong?"

"Nothing, nothing," said Bleeker, glancing quickly at Stradde for guidance.

It was when Hector was turning away from Bleeker to go back to the centre of the room that the strange,

uncanny sound was heard! It wasn't a groan, nor a whine, nor a muffled cry of pain. It was something blended of all three.

The vibrant nerves of the two partners made their hearing abnormally acute. That sound was louder to them than the booming of cannon. Involuntarily, their eyes seemed to start out of their sockets.

The sound had come from the dead or dying man in the next room!

Stradde heard it, but he was ready for any such emergency. He spoke quickly and loudly to distract the attention of his nephew.

"We'll have a long talk about your affairs in the morning, Hector," he said. "You have a year of tremendous work ahead of you and I want to get your mind back into the right groove. You know what I mean."

"I'm ready for work," said Hector. "Mountains of it." He smiled perplexedly and looked back at Bleeker. "Did you say anything just now—as I was turning away from you?"

"You've put on weight, Hector," said Stradde, striving to change the subject.

"I thought I heard you groan. Was that you, Mr. Bleeker?" Hector was looking at his man. "Confound it, I must be dreaming! Did you hear anything, Felice?"

Stradde turned over some papers on his desk.

"My boy, we were in the middle of very serious business," he said, "and business doesn't allow of interruption. Miss—Miss Greaves will understand, if you don't. Now that you've reported back, go down and amuse your aunt with an account of your wanderings. We'll be down to dinner."

In cold print, it may sound brutal, but Stradde could talk in that manner without giving offence. He could always impress on one the idea that business was a religion and must not be impeded by any other phase of life.

Hector took his dismissal with the light-heartedness of a youngster who was accustomed to the overbearing manner of a giant of finance. He slipped a hand into that of Felice.

"We'll leave them to it, darling," he said. "Uncle has been jolly lenient as it is. Eh, Uncle ?"

"Very lenient," said Stradde, and he meant it even if Hector didn't.

As the door closed on the nephew and the girl, Stradde slipped the bolt.

Bleeker and Hamshaw watched him with something like terror in their gaze. When Stradde swung around to them they saw what they believed to be the speck of insanity in his eyes.

"Now, for God's sake, pull yourselves together," he said fiercely. "You, Bleeker, need this !" He poured out a stiff brandy and literally forced it between Bleeker's lips.

Hamshaw was swaying.

"You heard it ?" he dared to ask.

"Heard—*what* ?" said Stradde.

Bleeker answered by pointing a shaking finger at the door of that other room.

Stradde went quickly to the door and flung it open. He passed in. The others crept fearfully to the doorway and glanced over his shoulder. They saw the body of Sir Gerald on the floor. They saw the gleam of the revolver's barrel—the weapon had fallen from the nerveless fingers and was almost touching the face.

And they saw the small dark pool that had gathered on the carpet.

Stradde stooped and moved the body so that it lay face upward. He came back to the study, the others retreating precipitately.

"He's dead, all right," he said. "Of course, I blame you, Bleeker, for bringing him here. Why the devil did you do it ? Were you crazy ?"

Bleeker couldn't speak coherently. He slumped on a chair and stared vacantly at the floor.

"What now ?" said Hamshaw, making a great effort to regain composure and apply a business brain to the elucidating of the horrible problem. "What's the best thing to do ?"

"The obvious thing," said Stradde, bitterly. "Send for a doctor and the police. Get the damned thing out of the house."

Bleeker made a faint exclamation of horror. Did Stradde understand that he was speaking of the dead when he referred to the "damned thing". Could money, the insensate love of it, so crush human sense of respect that he could call a dead man a "damned thing" ?

Hamshaw asked : "Will you send for Hector ?"

Stradde laughed mirthlessly at the suggestion.

"Poor fool !" he said. "You're nearly as bad as Bleeker. They need not know anything about it downstairs until to-morrow. "He picked up the telephone and spoke to his doctor. The others listened helplessly.

". . . Come around to my private door at the back of the premises. You know your way about here. And call at the police station on your way. Instruct them that I want absolutely no demonstration. You know what I mean by that. Bring the inspector and arrange for the removal of the body to the nearest mortuary !"

He replaced the receiver on the hook, helped himself to a draught of soda-water, and sat down at his desk as though he were about to start work. The other two merely stared. Stradde opened letters, examined papers, made rapid calculations on a pad, even refilled a fountain-pen (that act seemed to fascinate both Hamshaw and Bleeker. They leaned forward, their gaze riveted on the steady hand that held the pen over the ink-bottle. His tremendous nerve lent them a little strength.)

He talked to them about business matters wholly

apart from that concerning Sir Gerald. He asked about cables from Brussels and Berlin, talked calmly as though he were just settling down to his work in the office after a short holiday.

Then the doctor and the police arrived. Stradde went into the corridor and received them as they came up the stairs from the back of the premises. He lied freely and no one dreamed of correcting him. Sir Gerald, he said, was virtually a stranger to him, but there had been one or two small transactions in business. Mr. Hamshaw would give the inspector particulars of all that had happened in that room.

The doctor returned to the study after a cursory examination of the body. On his face there was an expression of doubt, perplexity. There was nothing accusatory in his voice when he spoke to Stradde; the magnate was the last person in the world whose favours he would willingly lose.

"Did anyone go into the room immediately after the shot was heard?" he asked.

"Mr. Bleeker looked in—went in," said Stradde, curtly. "Why do you ask?"

"Because I should say that death was not instantaneous," said the doctor. "Was there no cry? No sound?"

"None," said Stradde, shooting a warning glance at his partners.

"He must have lived for some minutes after firing the shot," said the doctor. "And I'm not certain that he might not have been saved if—if the proper attention had been given at the right moment."

"You are only surmising this?" said Stradde, sternly.

"Naturally," said the doctor. And then he saw the look in Stradde's eyes and held his tongue.

Bleeker's lips were moving faintly. Stradde motioned to Hamshaw.

"Get him another brandy," he said, in an undertone.

The police took the body away. And the inspector

took with him the ten-pound note that Stradde slipped into his hand.

"You will be in charge of the inquiry, I suppose?" he said. "See that everything is done circumspectly. It is a deplorable affair. Poor devil! I wish I could have helped him."

All quiet in the room! Bleeker's face was pinched and bloodless: his lips were apart—he didn't appear to have the strength to close them: there was a fixed stare in his eyes.

Hamshaw, as though he would ingratiate himself with the chief, shrugged his shoulders and made a feeble gesture with his hands: it implied that they couldn't expect too much of Bleeker: Bleeker was naturally squeamish.

Stradde helped himself to yet another wretched soda-water. Hamshaw watched the action of depressing the siphon lever as though it were his special job in life to see that the act was done properly. Bleeker stared at the glass held in the hand of the chief. He was looking for the tremor that wasn't there.

Hamshaw spoke:

"There's Hector?" he said, insinuating that they couldn't leave out the possibility of Hector making a scene when he heard the news.

Stradde's reply to that did both of the junior partners a world of good.

"Are you referring to my nephew?" he asked, sternly.

"I beg your pardon," said Hamshaw. "I should have said Mr. Farrar."

"Exactly," said Stradde in the tone of one who is ready to forgive once, but not twice. "I'm going to ring for my nephew," he said. "If either of you are still feeling the reaction of the little drama, you may get out of the room. Loewenstein's in Marseilles—isn't he, Hamshaw?"

"He was there this morning," said Hamshaw.

"I want a message taken to him immediately," said Stradde, and stroked his chin with finger and thumb. "I feel that my nephew is the very person to take that message. It is so confidential. . . . Well? Will you wait?"

"Naturally," said Hamshaw, speaking for Bleeker.

Stradde lifted the receiver of the house telephone and spoke to the footman.

"Ask Mr. Farrar to come up here immediately," he said.

Bleeker turned instinctively and gazed at the door of that room in which Sir Gerald had taken his life. In his eyes there was the fear that the door might open and the dead man walk out and ask of them: "What lie are you going to tell?"

Hector came lightly up the stairs.

"I believe dinner will be served in next to no time," he said cheerily, "and I haven't dressed yet."

"Excellent," said Stradde. "That suits the exigencies of the moment. Sit down, Hector."

Hector wasn't surprised. Many a time he had been summoned to the Board-room in Brakart Court Chambers and received a curt instruction from his chief.

"Hector!" Stradde hooked his thumbs under his arm-pits. "The firm has need of your services at what you will say is a preposterous moment. I believe that you didn't expect to return to business until another week had passed."

Hector held up a hand.

"My dear Uncle," he said, "you know that my heart's in my work all the time."

"I know that," said Stradde. "But you have just introduced us to your fiancée. It took me by surprise, I'll admit, but you youngsters do the most amazing things nowadays. Felice understands that business must come first. Yes?"

"I'm certain of that," said Hector, lightly.

"Good!" said Stradde. Then, with brutal swiftness:

"How long will it take you to get to Charing Cross. I want you to go straight to Marseilles !"

"Marseilles, Uncle ?"

"It may mean a couple of hundred thousand to the firm—that's all," said Stradde. "Mr. Hamshaw will correct me if I exaggerate the importance of the affair. I want you to meet Mr. Loewenstein, my German agent. He has some very important message to transmit and take. I'll give you mine in a few minutes. The thing is : can you get away without fuss ?"

"To-night ?"

"Now. Within five minutes. You don't need a passport. I'll attend to all that. I want you to attend to a few matters in Town before you go."

"Go—before dinner ?"

"Does dinner mean more to you than a couple of hundred thousand means to the firm ?"

"I get you, Uncle. Certainly I can go."

"Where is your—your fiancée ?"

"With my aunt."

"Go to her and tell her that if she wishes to commend her character to me, she will raise no foolish objections. This may mean a tremendous thing to both of you. Understand ?"

"Perfectly, Uncle." The crestfallen expression on his face touched Hamshaw, who reached for a time-table, turned over the pages at random and was grateful for the subterfuge.

"Dine on the train," said Stradde, curtly. He was seeking to give the impression that in business—big business—nothing in the nature of sentiment must be tolerated. "I'll phone them to make arrangements for you. Send a wire from Paris that you're well on your way. Don't stop off there. Don't waste any time."

"As you wish, Uncle." There wasn't much enthusiasm in Hector's voice.

Hamshaw felt that it was his duty to back up his chief by commending Hector.

"You are the only one I would care to entrust with this mission," he said.

Stradde nodded approvingly.

"I'm satisfied," he said, looking at Hector. Don't let me down, or Mr. Hamshaw will think you're not all I've said you are."

Hector went downstairs to the drawing-room. He had five minutes in which to speak to his aunt and Felice. He spoke as one who had been singled out for a tremendous project. He infused some of this enthusiasm into Felice. She was very brave about it.

Mrs. Stradde stared at nothing for a while. Her eyes were shining. Then she felt for the hand of the girl and picked up the thread of conversation that had been broken by the entrance of Hector.

"Romance! Romance!" she murmured. "Oh, my dears! A love romance. Keep it beautiful all your life. Let no other consideration rob it of one single breath." She let go her hold on the girl's hand and gripped the arm-rest of her chair. "Above all things, my dear—my pretty dear—never allow money, or the making of it, to erect a barrier between you."

Hector stooped and touched her forehead with his lips.

"Dear Aunt," he said, gently, and kissed her again. "You understand so much. Love does mean a great deal to me and Felice."

"So much! So much!" said the middle-aged woman, sadly.

Felice felt again for the thin, blue-lined hand.

"You speak as though you, too, had known romance," she said, softly.

"Yes," said Mrs. Stradde. And she stared again at a vision and nodded her head to her thoughts.

Upstairs, Stradde spoke to his partners. He looked rather contemptuously at Bleeker as he spoke.

"That matter's settled," he said. "We'll have dinner early as I must go out again this evening." He made some rapid notes in his pocket diary. "Hamshaw,"

he said, and this time with uncanny casualness, "you had better attend the inquest: Bleeker's nerves are not too good. See Quean and Tapp and instruct them to get counsel to represent us."

Hamshaw made some notes in turn. He nodded as though he awaited further instructions. Bleeker could see that the gold pencil in Hamshaw's fingers was shaking.

"The line to take," said Stradde, "is that Greaves came to the office earlier in the day—tried to get an advance—told us he was hard hit—gave the people at the office the impression that he was distraught. You, Bleeker, urged him to go home and rest—told him that everybody in the country was feeling the pinch of hard times. Anyhow, that's the general line to take. Only keep my name out of it."

Hamshaw looked up and challenged. He didn't mind one or two little lies, but he wanted to feel safer about it.

"You are not forgetting that he came here," he began.

"You mean," said Stradde, "that he forced his way into my house while I was upstairs or out of the place. You were in here, awaiting my return. Then the thing happened and, naturally, I was horrified when I learned about it. . . . I had an excellent report from Loewenstein, Hamshaw. He is certain that the upward turn may occur at any moment. . . . Hector looks well? What? Excellent fellow, Hector, but he doesn't quite grasp the significance of hard work." The brain was travelling at terrific speed. "Anything in from New York, Hamshaw? I hadn't time to go into Harriton's report before leaving the office."

"Nothing," said Hamshaw.

"Um! Harriton doesn't strike me as being sufficiently active. What?"

"You have always thought a great deal of him," said Hamshaw.

"I don't think a great deal of anybody," said Stradde. He drank another glassful of soda-water. "Let's have dinner," he said, bluntly. "We'll have it alone. I don't want Hector to be kept hanging about. He ought to be on the move."

Hector knocked at the door and entered at the curt invitation of his uncle.

"Everything is ready," he said. Hamshaw fancied he looked in the direction of the fateful door, but then his nerves were a trifle frayed and his imagination was quickened.

Stradde unlocked a drawer of his desk and counted out a number of bank-notes.

"Exercise economy," he said, curtly, "but don't hesitate to wire for any sum you find necessary. Good-bye."

"And my instructions ?" said Hector.

Stradde gave him a sealed envelope.

"Get to Marseilles as quickly as possible," he said. "I would let you go by 'plane but perhaps that wouldn't be fair to—to your fiancée."

It was just the clever human touch to satisfy the young man that his job was of immense importance. The suggestion that his relative could think of Felice in that moment was proof of his greatness of mind.

When Hector was gone, Mrs. Stradde comforted the young girl.

"I didn't think you had so much courage," she said. "You and Hector will be very happy so long as you, my dear, bring yourself to realize that in business there must always be sacrifices to make." She sighed before adding : "And generally it is the woman who has to make them. Perhaps that is as it ought to be." She stared again in the direction of the windows. "It's a beautiful evening, my dear," she said. "When you have had dinner you will want to return home. I'd like to go with you."

"With me?" said Felice, and looked up in happy surprise. "Father will be delighted to see you."

Mrs. Stradde shook her head and sighed again.

"No, I cannot come to see your father to-night," she said, "but some day—yes, some day."

"But you said you would like to come with me," said Felice.

"We will drive to your father's place," said Mrs. Stradde, "and I will leave you there. In the summer it is my unfailing practice to go out for a quiet drive after dinner. Mr. Stradde does not deny me that; he is so busy, even at the end of a long day at the office, that he hasn't an opportunity of accompanying me as often as he might wish."

"Do you drive in the Park?"

"No, child. My tastes are peculiar, you will say. I prefer to drive in the City."

"In the City! How strange, Mrs. Stradde!"

"And yet how beautiful!" said the older woman. "I should shrink from going there during the day when men are wrestling with money problems: I can imagine it must be terrible. In the evening, when the offices are closed and the principals and the clerks have gone away, there is a joyous peace. So quiet! So restful! Even the stones and the pigeons seem to be murmuring their gratitude for respite."

"I should love to come with you," said Felice. She wasn't prepared for the reply.

"No, thank you"—hastily. "I prefer to go by myself. The chauffeur drives very slowly: he knows that I like to talk to myself as we go along. I think he understands."

"Understands—what?"

The thin features coloured slightly. Mrs. Stradde appeared to be affronted, suspicious. Her fingers tapped on the arm-rests of the chair.

"Did you speak, child?" she said. "I was dreaming. Your voice came so sharply! What was I saying?

Dear me! How my memory fails me these days! Yes, yes! I love the City of London in the twilight. Now, now let's talk about something else. You love my dear Hector?"

"Adore him, Mrs. Stradde."

"Always adore him," said the older woman. "Sometimes I wish that he were in another profession, but I suppose it's not for me to lament that he is in business."

"You love Hector very dearly, Mrs. Stradde?"

"I brought him up," said the tired woman, and a light of happiness shone in her eyes."

"He believes in himself," said Felice. "His ambition is limitless. One day he will be at the head of Messrs. Stradde, Hamshaw and . . ."

"Stop!" It was a command. The look of momentary happiness was dissipated. The tired eyes took to themselves a fire. "He will be nothing of the sort," said Mrs. Stradde.

"I'm sorry." Felice held out her hand entreatingly. "What I meant was that Mr. Stradde might wish to retire from business one day and enjoy life with you, far from the striving and the worrying. Hector would be able to manage so splendidly."

"Men retire from business only to die," said the middle-aged woman.

And understanding was given to the girl in that moment. She divined that hidden away in the heart of this faded woman was a disappointment that could never find compensation. She hated business. She hated finance. Felice recalled her words, spoken so bitterly, about sacrifices that had to be made . . . "And generally it is the woman who has to make them."

Stradde spoke to them both a few minutes before they left the house. He had got rid of Hamshaw and Bleeker, and something like reaction was troubling him. He gave Felice a look that was disturbing to her.

"I am sorry that Hector had to go away so soon," he said, awkwardly. He looked at his wife.

"May I have the limousine as usual, Michael?" she asked in a distant voice.

"As usual," he affirmed.

"I am going to take Felice home."

He gave a start as though he suddenly realized that the girl would be going home to tragedy.

"Oh, yes," he said, and fell into silence.

The limousine took away the two women. Stradde watched from the window of the drawing-room, then went to his study. He was still thinking of what awaited Felice, but he wasn't conscious of any feeling of pity—only annoyance that his day should have been so mangled by a weak-kneed fellow like Sir Gerald. He appreciated that the girl would learn the news of the tragedy as soon as she reached home—the police would have communicated with the household: they would be there.

Stradde prepared to go out. The action was that of the ostrich that hides its head in the sand. So long as he was not available to police or newspaper reporters the tragedy, for the girl, was postponed indefinitely.

He gave instructions to have his own personal car brought round. Then he passed into his bedroom, undressed, slipped on a silk dressing-gown, and went to the top of the house where the swimming pool shimmered under the electric lights which he had switched on as he neared the door. (All lights in the house were fitted with dual switches: Stradde, in spite of his physical and moral courage, could never bring himself to enter a darkened room.)

He plunged into the swimming bath, swam strongly for five minutes, got out, rubbed himself briskly and returned to his room to dress. The footman met him on the landing outside the bedroom. He elevated his eyebrows inquiringly: Stradde understood that there had been a telephone message.

"I'm out," he said, bluntly, and passed into his bedroom.

He dressed with more than usual care, and here, again, was a characteristic of the man that might have intrigued the psychologist. He employed no valet. He would have been affronted by the suggestion that a valet was an essential to a man in his position. He detested the sybaritic. He would say: "When I am no longer able to lift my head from my pillow I will pay for the services of a personal attendant."

Within half an hour after the two women left the house, Stradde was sitting back in his limousine. The car headed westward.

* * * * *

In that other limousine, and now alone, Mrs. Stradde was driving eastward—to the City where the turmoil of day had given place to a beautiful calm. Very slowly the car wove its way along the deserted thoroughfares. The chauffeur had no need of instructions: he had followed this route so often that secret and sincere regard for his mistress had attuned his thoughts to hers. They were both living in the past.

No traffic. Silent streets. Big, gloomy buildings steeped in silence and seeming to heave in relief. Empty hives. Toil and turmoil ended. Even the half-open notebook of a typist, leaning against a window high up against the roofs, seemed to be looking down into the street in gratitude.

Slowly the limousine passed on. Down Bishopsgate, turning, ever turning, now along Fenchurch Street, turning, ever turning, until it came to that which it sought. The offices of Edward Gonzolas, General Merchant, were in a small square around which lofty buildings had grown up in insolent contempt of its smallness: they seemed to be crowding in on it, resentful of its presence, indignant because of their impotency to have it removed or completely obscured.

The offices of Gonzolas, even the business belonged

to Yesterday, when merchants lived in apartments over their offices and were content with a tiny square of garden in the rear wherein to walk in silence when dusk was come and rest was given to man. You caught the meanest glimpse of the garden of Edward Gonzolas. There was a chink between two great blustering buildings, and from an angle of twenty-five degrees you could see the walled enclosure, the mulberry tree and the tiny grass plot. The walls were black with age, the mulberry tree was ragged and worn and feeble of leaf, yet—faithful, as it were.

And walking in the garden, his hands clasped behind the dark-brown velvet smoking jacket, was a man who carried about him the very atmosphere of romance—the romance that belonged to Yesterday. He was tall, rather bent of shoulder, thin of feature, grey of hair. He walked slowly, meditatively, with head slightly bowed, gait measured. He paused to reach up to a branch of the mulberry tree as the limousine stopped for an instant: he didn't look around: she saw only the back of his head. Then he moved out of sight, and the limousine passed on, seemingly of its own volition—as though it were satisfied for the day.

Yesterday! With memories refusing to die!

. . . . .

The history of the firm of Stradde went back over many generations: in the City there was probably only one other firm with so long a record—that of Gonzolas Brothers, General Merchants.

Stradde, Hamshaw and Bleeker were represented in almost every market of the world: they were shippers, exporters, merchant bankers, and handled merchandise of every description. Silver was the obsession of Michael Stradde, and if he had brought his partners to believe in it as a phase of the business that might revolutionize the world they were beginning to lose

some of their confidence because of the manner in which he had allowed the silver market to absorb him.

Between Regent's Park and Hampstead, Stradde's car was stopped outside a Georgian house which, like that other abode of mystery and romance in the City, had been hedged about by modern mansions.

Stradde alighted, but gave no order to the chauffeur, who knew his work and whose understanding commended him to his master more than his efficiency as a driver. The car moved on and away from the house. It would return at exactly the right moment, yet no instruction had been given. Stradde would step out of the house, walk briskly down the steps, pass into the limousine and be driven away.

The footman who opened the door seemed to be part of the whole scheme of silence and secrecy. There was no more than a subservient bowing of the head. Stradde nodded in return. At that moment the door of the drawing-room on the left was opened. Stradde stepped to one side as a servant came out, followed by a tall, grey-haired man whom he thought he recognized as a peer whose name had frequently been mentioned in connection with a shipping merger.

The first servant looked at Stradde, and led the way to the drawing-room. He made the announcement in little more than a whisper :

"Mr. Stradde, madam."

Stradde walked in. She came forward to meet him—a glorious figure, so impressive that her personality seemed to impregnate the atmosphere.

"You didn't expect me, Mauvine ?"

"I am always hopeful," she said.

Stradde placed her extended hand between his palms and patted it as though she were a child seeking to be reassured. He sat down on the couch and she sat beside him. She was a woman of about thirty-five, and she would keep that age till the end of her days. Marvellously preserved ! Beautifully dressed ! Every

detail of her toilet contributed perfectly to the general effect. There was nothing of the courtesan about La Lune. No craving of favours, no arrogance, no insistence on her individuality, no domineering. The head was small, the neck long and slender, the bosoms round and firm and wonderfully inviting. Her hands were fascinating: the long thin fingers were as delicate as the frond of fern; the eyes were full of an ambition that might never be understood. She was not a mercenary, yet the intelligence that shone in her pupils would have impressed an observer with the conviction that her mind had grappled with, and solved, the intricacies of finance on a large scale. When she spoke it was in a mellow, yet compelling tone—a tone that was eloquent of her own capabilities.

"I seem to have intruded," said Stradde, referring to the peer who had just taken his leave.

She laughed good-naturedly.

"I would have liked you to meet Lord Pynton," she said; "and I know that he would like to meet you."

He made a gesture that was half-conceit, half-impatience.

"I have so little time, my dear."

"Exactly. Neither men nor women have much attraction for you."

Another show of impatience.

"Don't let us talk small talk," he said. "Who is Pynton, anyway?"

"One of the few peers left with any money," she said. "He has been telling me about his horses."

"How interesting!"

"He's selling the whole of his stable."

"How wise!"

"And he offered me the best horse as a gift."

"How foolish!"

"I told him so. . . . Well? What's the trouble this time?"

Stradde affected surprise.

"Do I look as though I were troubled?" he asked.

"No, my dear, you exude it. Have you dined?"

"Too well, Mauvine."

"How's the market?"

"Falling."

"Dear, dear! Everything falls save your courage."

"Tell me, Mauvine, is Pynton one of your admirers?"

"Naturally." She said it without a smile.

"In vulgar phraseology, I don't like followers."

"How beautiful that sounds," she said. The day may come when you will be glad to have poor Pynton as a friend."

"Prophetess!"

"Have I depressed you?"

"When you hint at failure you depress. Never do that again."

"I am your loyal slave."

"And don't be cynical, Mauvine. I hate you, or any woman in that mood."

"Shall I ring for the footman to show you out?"

"If you are tired of my company already."

"I love it, but the things one loves the most are very difficult to hold. Ever noticed that?"

"Is Pynton solid?"

"Next to yourself he probably controls more money than anyone else in the country."

"Apart from *controlling* it, has he anything more substantial than his title?"

"The family is enormously rich."

He jerked up his eyebrows; his interest was quickened.

"Does silver interest him?" he asked, hopefully.

"I haven't asked him that," she said. "Thus far, we have talked only of the lighter side of life."

She sighed, and smiled as she sighed. She liked to pique him.

He resented her remark and frowned.

"He seemed to me to be too old for *that* sort of thing," he said brutally.

She laughed pleasantly.

"The bear growls," she said. "Yet I love to hear that growl."

"Oh, I'm not jealous," said Stradde.

"Of course you're not. One has to be in love before one can be jealous."

"Exactly."

"And how absurd to talk of Michael Stradde being in love with anybody or anything save——"

"Save—what ?"

"Himself and silver." Mauvine said that dramatically.

"I said just now that I don't like you when you're in a cynical mood," said Stradde. "Shall we talk about this—this wealthy peer ?"

"Why waste our time ? Do you realize that you haven't been to see me for four whole days ?"

"I've been dreadfully busy."

"*Pauvre petit !*" She leaned towards him and playfully stroked the back of his hand.

"Everything has gone wrong of late," he said.

"Everything save—save La Lune ? Say so."

"I can always rely on you," he said, rather sullenly.

"Of course. Now, tell me of the troubles so that I may help."

"Is there—is there anything between you and this fellow Pynton ?"

"Oh ! So you are jealous ? How perfectly sweet of you ! I told you that he is very rich : he may be useful one day."

"In what way ?"

"He may be tempted to buy silver."

"Ah !" Stradde breathed relievedly. "That's it, you wonder woman," he said. "It's good to know that you believe in me."

"I have always believed in you, although I'm not certain that I know why."

"One day the whole world will stand amazed."

"When silver has touched, say, ninety ?"

"Yes. And it will do it. I shall make thirty or forty millions on that day."

"It's a big dream, *Michael*." She mouthed that name very softly, very tenderly, and moved slightly nearer.

"That's my dream," he said, in a half-whisper. "It means power, dear woman, and power is more to be coveted than——"

"Love ?"

"Love comes afterwards."

She abandoned her smile : an expression of great yearning showed on her face.

"Why—why do I love you ?" she asked.

He turned to look into her big eyes. The red lips were moist and inviting ; the fragrance of her enveloped him—only for a moment. He shook his shoulders irritably.

"Let's get back to business," he said.

"Very well," she replied, and moved from him. "What was the nature of the trouble you mentioned ?"

He told her of Sir Gerald Greaves and Hector and Felice. She listened rather disinterestedly. He had taught her to value human life very lightly—to subordinate it to the mighty quest of money—big money. He told her about Bleeker and Hamshaw, hinted at possible disagreements with them, wished he could pump courage into them, feared that they might try to frustrate his great scheme by their smallness of mind, their subservience to what they called the principles of business : they had no pluck ; they lacked just that fire so essential to the gambler who would bring the world to heel by the throw of a card.

La Lune reached again for his hand. There was intense solicitude in the gaze she directed on him.

"I fear both Bleeker and Hamshaw," she said. The rise and fall of her bosom convinced him of her sincerity in that moment.

"What do you know?" he asked, suspiciously.

"Nothing beyond what you have told me from time to time," she said. "I had a hateful dream the other night."

"Dreams don't disturb my mind," said Stradde.

"They guide a woman with greater insistence than her religion," said La Lune. "I dreamed that Bleeker came to you for two hundred thousand for his department. You couldn't do it, and said so. He was holding his right hand behind his back, and you were sitting there, in your chair, unsuspecting. Then he levelled the revolver at your head."

"My dear! My dear!" said Stradde. "You are becoming too theatrical."

"And he shot you through the brain!"

"Bleeker wouldn't have the courage to shoot a rat."

"That's what he called you as he levelled the horrible thing. A rat—a human rat!"

"Shall we talk of something more pleasant?"

"How unimaginative you are!" She regarded him intently and nodded to her thoughts. "Why—why do I think so much about you?" she asked and shook her head helplessly. "Why do I regard you as the only human thing that matters in this life?"

Stradde stirred restlessly.

"I don't like you in this humour either," he said. "You know that it is foreign to me. Not essential. Means nothing."

"It means everything to both of us," she said. "Oh, God! Why did I allow you to infect me with your fever? Silver! Silver! Silver! Always silver!"

He rose from the couch and walked to the occasional table where the inevitable soda-water siphon was in readiness (she studied his every mood). He drank greedily, and came back to her.

"There'll be hell to pay when Hector returns, I suppose."

She gave a start and reached again for his arm as

though she would protect him from something that threatened.

"Oh, yes," she said. "Hector! I'd forgotten him. You're not afraid even if he did take up any—any angry attitude?"

Stradde smiled reassuringly.

"I'm not afraid of anyone," he said, not bombastically, but with deep sincerity. He lowered his voice to a tender key as he added. "All that I fear is that one day I may lose you."

It wasn't undue sentiment. She knew that he didn't indulge in the moods of a lover. She accepted the statement with a slight inclining of the head.

"You need never doubt my loyalty," she said.

"I want always to feel that if the rest of the world arrayed itself against me, there would still be you to rely on." He frowned at a recollection. "You don't encourage Lord Pynton to come here—do you?" he asked.

She shrugged her expressive shoulders.

"If I seem to cultivate his acquaintance," she said, "it is only the mercenary in me that urges it. He may be useful some day. You must not be jealous?"

"Jealous?" said Stradde and laughed softly. "That isn't part of my nature."

She sighed softly, yet playfully.

"Sometimes I wish that it were," she said. And before he could make a comment, she added, rather briskly: "Well! How's the theatrical business?"

"Useful—just useful," he said.

"This—this Marguerite I hear about——?"

"As useful as any other figure in the theatre," said Stradde brutally.

"She may attract the right people? Is that it?"

Stradde made a gesture of annoyance.

"Why question me about these minor things?" he asked.

"For no other reason than that I am always anxious for your welfare."

"I haven't a great deal invested in theatres," said Stradde. "It's a pretty good side-line to have. Does your friend, Lord Pynton, take an interest in theatricals ?"

"He's that type," she said.

"Good !" said Stradde. "Keep him interested."

The conversation was halted by her crossing the room to set a framed photograph of Stradde in a new position—a basket of flowers had obscured it.

Stradde smiled as he said :

"Pynton brings thee violets ? Eh ?"

She smiled back, for she divined his thoughts.

"And dared to allow them to hide your face," she said.

"So many try to eclipse Michael Stradde," he replied grimly.

She went back to her place on the couch. She asked abruptly :

"Who is Edward Gonzolas, merchant ? Has a place in the City ?"

She was watching him from the corner of her eye, but he betrayed no particular interest.

"Who is anybody in the City ?" he asked.

"Why I asked you is that I have been advised to make his acquaintance if I am still interested in silver."

"Really," said Stradde. "Have you ever seen this—this Gonzolas ?"

"Once," she said and lapsed into silence.

"He has been in the City as long as we have, I believe. I know the name—that's all."

"You've never mentioned it to me."

"Why should I ? It doesn't interest me."

"And you haven't asked me where it was that I saw him," she said. "You provoke me."

"I shouldn't say that he would interest you."

"You're wrong," she said, provoking him in turn. "I met him in the bank one morning and I confess

that I was almost rude in my inquisitiveness. I 'felt' his presence. You know what I mean ?"

Stradde's thoughts were leagues away already. She tapped him lightly on the forearm.

"You *are* worried about something," she said reproachfully. "And for once you are not disposed to take me into your confidence. How is *Mrs*. Stradde ?"

He swung upon her impatiently.

"Why did you ask that question ?" he said.

"I'm sorry," she replied. It was the first time she had ever brought the name of his wife into their intimate conversation, and in truth she had no important reason for so doing now.

He changed his mood instantly.

"Going out to-night ?" he asked with extraordinary solicitude.

"It wasn't my intention," she said. "I was going to have a quiet night at home."

"I'll take you for a drive."

"I'd love it."

"But don't talk. I want to think over one or two matters. Thoughts will come more easily if you are with me. We'll run across Hampstead Heath and out north of London. Eh ?"

"I shall be ready by the time you have finished another of those wretched soda-water drinks."

That was like her. No chance was given him to change his mind. She understood his mood. Before he had set down the empty glass on the table she was back in the room, the slim, lithe body enveloped in the cloak she knew he loved.

They left the house within a few minutes. They sat side by side in the limousine. He stared straight in front of him. She felt that her presence was fading away so far as he was concerned and yet he never ceased to pat her hand as it rested on his knee.

They were half-way across the Heath when the dramatic thing happened. She saw a man step out from

the shadow of a tree. She recognized him as the driver of a small two-seater car that had passed them on the road when they were dawdling along. She had noticed him turn in his seat and glance back at the limousine.

The man came from the shadow so quickly that she hadn't time to warn Michael Stradde of her fears. She saw the arm lift. She saw the spurt of flame.

The revolver bullet crashed through the window of the limousine on Stradde's side: she had flung herself forward and across Stradde, but the bullet didn't touch her.

The limousine was stopped instantly, but the figure of the man who had perpetrated the outrage seemed to blend with the dusk.

When she opened her eyes again, Stradde was smiling grimly.

"Better ?" he inquired and there wasn't the slightest trace of agitation in his voice. "I didn't trouble to chase the poor fool."

She looked anxiously into his eyes.

"You're not hurt ?" she asked, fearfully.

"Not even startled. No," he said, "I was afraid he had hit you."

"Shall you send for the police ?"

"Not likely," said Stradde. "I don't want any undesirable publicity. "I'll ring them up at the Yard to-night."

She was trembling violently.

"He might have killed you," she said in a horrific whisper.

"Not yet," said Stradde with amazing coolness. "Not yet. I have a great deal of work to do in this life before they get me." He wasn't indulging bravado.

They drove back to her house. He accompanied her in and made certain that she hadn't been hurt. He laughed at her frightened expression.

"My dear," he said, "it is all part of the life we have chosen to live. But—but have you ever calculated

the chances of a revolver shot hitting its target from a distance of thirty yards ? Not one man in a thousand gets within ten yards of his mark, and that fellow is probably still shaking with terror."

Again she looked into his eyes for that sign of insanity she seemed to fear she might find there.

He smiled back at her.

"I believe you're anxious to make a newspaper sensation of it," he said. "All right ! We'll get through to Bickerson's publicity man and tell him that the famous, the wondrous La Lune was deliberately shot at on the Heath to-night. That ought to keep your name in the papers for a week or two."

It was a jest on his part—his idea of a jest.

As he went down the path to the limousine after bidding her good night, he glanced at the *hole* in his right sleeve. As he stepped into the car after nodding to the chauffeur, he muttered to himself :

"My God ! My God !"

He lay back against the cushions of the car and wiped the cold sweat from his forehead.

CHAPTER FIVE

WITHIN the next twenty-four hours silver dropped four points. The office in Brakart Court Chambers might not have heard of it. Hamshaw made no reference to it either to his chief or to Bleeker. The note of tragedy was running too insistently through his brain to allow of his beginning another of those conferences which usually ended in Stradde losing his temper and accusing his partners of cowardice.

Bleeker moved through the morning and early afternoon as though he were no more than an automaton. There was a rush of small appointments that day, but he left most of them to his private secretary. His was the shipping department—an immensely important part of the business—and there were captains to see and reports to be considered and new voyages to be discussed. Bleeker came from the Baltic Exchange with a score of transactions dropped like dockets into the recesses of his mind: they would sort themselves out when that damnable sound of a revolver shot in Grosvenor Crescent house died out of his brain. There were many matters that demanded consultation with Michael Stradde—new commitments, the building of a new steamer for the South American route, the financing of the builders and so forth. The department must have an allotment of money within a few days; the superintending engineer had been in with his "requisitions", there was the victualling department clamouring for attention to essential details; two new captains were taking over commands and Stradde had said that more care must be taken in the making of these appointments (he was certain that the firm had been defrauded by skippers whose voices rang with the music of honesty and whose

brains worked with the speed of crooks—thus he insisted, for it was his nature to suspect). Bleeker was still listening to the report of that revolver shot.

It was a day of suppressed excitement in Bleeker's department, but no one save Bleeker himself could have said why. He had spoken to Mr. Hamshaw about nothing in particular. Hamshaw had stared at something immediately behind Bleeker. That was all.

From two o'clock till four, Hamshaw was out of the office. When he returned he looked into Bleeker's private office and nodded reassuringly. He had returned from the inquest on Sir Gerald Greaves.

Bleeker read all that he wished to learn in the eyes of Hamshaw and sank back in his chair with a sigh of relief. There was sweat under his eyes: he made a sign to his secretary to open the windows.

In Stradde's room there was an atmosphere of calm. Grymdyke the secretary might not have heard of the tragedy of the evening before, although it was in all the morning newspapers. Grymdyke was inured to these dramas in the world of business: suicides seemed to him to be inseparable from Big Gambling. And always he studied Stradde's face and mood the instant he entered the office. If the chief made no reference to what the rest of the City might be talking about it was not Grymdyke's place to broach the subject. . . .

"Message from Mr. Loewenstein, sir."

"Thanks, Grymdyke. Give me the new code book."

"And a letter from Mr. Bickerson about the lease of the Hamlet Theatre."

"Excellent! Hope he didn't phone about it?"

"No, sir."

"Too many secrets are betrayed in that way," said Stradde. "I've noticed that lately there has been considerable leakage."

Grymdyke knew that the chief hadn't noticed anything of the kind but it pleased him to suspect and accuse.

Hamshaw came in. He gave Grymdyke a glance and

the secretary left the room; he knew that he wasn't wanted.

Stradde dropped Loewenstein's message on the desk and nodded promptingly to his partner.

"Everything passed off satisfactorily," said Hamshaw, referring to the inquest.

"Naturally," said Stradde. "That's what counsel was paid for. What about the—the girl?"

"She wasn't present at the inquiry."

Stradde looked up suspiciously.

"Reason?" he asked.

"Unable to attend," said Hamshaw. "They've taken her to a nursing-home in Kensington. I understand that she broke down badly when she heard the news last night."

"Too bad," said Stradde casually. He handed Loewenstein's message across the desk. "What do you think of that?" he asked, and before the other could glance at it. "You took the name of the home, of course," he said. "Ring up the matron and instruct her to call in the best possible specialist."

Hamshaw rather expected this attitude, but he couldn't convince himself that it wasn't forced.

"How about communicating with Mr. Hector?" he asked. "He should be in Marseilles."

"That's my affair," said Stradde, shortly. The gesture implied that the conversation had better take another turn. "I had an adventure last night, Hamshaw." He laughed unpleasantly. "A fellow shot at me while I was out driving on Hampstead Heath."

Hamshaw's eyes rounded in alarm.

"Oh, he didn't hit me," said Stradde, "but that wasn't his fault, as you might say."

"There was nothing in the papers about it this morning," said Hamshaw.

"No, I was lucky in that. Tell me, when last was that fellow, Druggit, in the office. He lost his head rather badly over that Stanten mortgage we took."

"He went out of his mind for a time, so I believe," said Hamshaw. "Why ?"

"I fancy that was the man," said Stradde. "He'd better be seen to. We'll get him certified as a lunatic. That's the way to handle fools."

Hamshaw nodded vaguely. He, in turn, changed the subject of conversation.

"I'm giving a political garden party on the twenty-first," he said. "Do you think you will be able to run down ?"

"To Surrey ? No, thanks, Hamshaw. Unless there's some special significance attached to the affair. I hate these damned politicians. You know that."

"I thought we might pick up some interesting gossip. That's all."

Stradde smiled cynically : he knew the truth. Hamshaw was compelled by his fluffy-brained wife to cultivate the acquaintance of political leaders. She was infected with the disease of snobbery in its most virulent form : she wanted to pose to the world as the wife of a titled man and she was satisfied that she could attain her ends by making use of her husband's money.

"Gossip !" echoed Stradde. "Any gossip you may pick up at a garden party is worth little more than the weeds that may have been left on your flower-beds. Take my advice, Hamshaw, and buy your political information in the best market. Pay for it with ready money, and don't whine if you find that what you've bought is cheap and shoddy."

As Hamshaw went out of the room, Grymdyke came in.

"Send in that outside messenger," said Stradde. "I want him to take a message to Hampstead for me."

The whimsical, happy Tom Slater came in like a breath of fresh air. There was only one person in the whole of that office who didn't know the meaning of fear in the presence of the chief. Tom Slater could never understand why anybody should be afraid of the

magnate. If Slater had been receiving a salary of three thousand a year he might have trembled at the knees when the summons came to stand in the Presence. He was earning only three pounds a week and he could get that much from any business man in the City. Slater was worth his wage if only to stand around and grin when everybody else was shrouded in gloom. Sometimes there is a great joy in being the poorest-paid servant on the staff—a sense of independence goes with the salary and makes life worth while.

Michael Stradde had his human moments. Instead of flinging his orders as though the words were fireworks, he looked scrutinizingly at the grinning Slater and actually smiled.

"Slater—isn't it ?" he said.

"Yessir—Tom." Slater nodded not familiarly, but with a sort of "you-and-me-understand-each-other, guv'nor" gesture.

"Slater will do," said Stradde severely.

"Yessir—that'll do. Everybody calls me Tom."

"How long have you been with the firm ?"

"Oh, I dunno, sir. Mebbe twenty years. I came here as a boy, sir."

"Really," said Stradde. "And you've been content to stay here all that time at—at——"

"Three pounds a week, sir."

"Any complaints ?"

Slater's grin departed for a fleeting second.

"Goo' lor', no, sir."

Stradde loved preaching homilies when he was in the right mood.

"I don't think the more of you for that," said he. "Why should an able-bodied man be content to take only three pounds a week all his life ? Have you no ambition ?"

Tom Slater summoned back the disarming grin.

"If I haven't the missus has, sir," he dared to say.

Stradde smiled with him this time.

"Married !" he exclaimed. "On three pounds a week !"

"There's many done it on less, sir," said Slater. "Me and the wife are happy on it. We save."

"Save ?" Stradde was grateful for this diversion : it was taking his mind from so many unpleasant subjects.

"And what do you do with your savings ?" he asked. "Invest them in—in silver ?"

Silver again ! Always silver !

"No, sir," said Tom, stroking the point of his chin. "We save enough out of the housekeeping money to go to the pictures once a week. Sometimes, it runs to two shows."

"Pictures ?" said Stradde, as though he had never heard of the cinema. "Were you going to the pictures, whatever that means, to-night ?"

"No, sir. To tell you the truth, we were a bit extravagant last week. We ate all our cake in one meal if you understand me, sir." Stradde was writing a note, but Slater went on. "There was a La Lune picture at the Capitol and we just had to go twice."

Stradde threw up his head as though he suspected impertinence.

"La Lune !" he echoed and frowned.

"Marvellous," said the enthusiastic fan.

Stradde gave him a steady look.

"La Lune doesn't make pictures now," he said. "You see, I know a little about it."

"No, sir, but the last one she made is only just released in the country. We ain't 'arf behind the times, sir."

Stradde sealed the letter. His old domineering manner returned.

"Pictures appear to make you talk too much," he said. "Take this message to the address on the envelope. Take a taxi and see that the letter is delivered into the lady's hand. When you return to the office to-morrow, give Mr. Grymdyke a note to inform me that it has been delivered. Understand ?"

"Perfectly, sir."

Stradde opened his wallet and handed over a pound note.

"Pay for the taxi out of that," he said, "and keep the change. Always take care of the silver, Slater, and one of these days you will be a rich man."

No, it wasn't the casual jest of a magnate who had a fleeting desire to play the moralist. It was Stradde the obsessed that spoke : he derived elation from talking of his dreams even to a minor servant.

Slater grinned as he pocketed the pound note.

"That's what Mr. Gonzolas told me one day," he said. "When he gave me a present for picking up a letter he'd dropped."

Stradde was writing ; he appeared to take no notice of the remark. Slater backed out of the room ; he was rather afraid that he had taken advantage of the momentary affability of his chief.

The door was closed. Michael Stradde stared at the writing-pad before him. Gonzolas ! Why did that name insist on booming through his brain ? Who was Gonzolas ? Why worry about Gonzolas ? Whence came the feeling that in some indefinable way a Gonzolas was worming himself into his affairs ? La Lune—Mauvine—had mentioned him ! And, now, this happy-go-lucky messenger had spoken his name. There seemed to be a conspiracy to force the name on his brain. He rang for Grymdyke.

"What do you know about Edward Gonzolas ?" Stradde asked. "Have we ever done business with him ?"

"Gonzolas," he said, and smiled. "He's known as Old Mulberry Tree. Oh, yes, we've done business with the firm in the past."

"Why Mulberry Tree ?" said Stradde and frowned at the suggestion of levity.

"It used to be Gonzolas Brothers, but he is the only one in the firm to-day. His place is only a hundred yards from these offices—quaint old place, with a walled-in

garden that contains just that one mulberry tree—supposed to have been planted by Nell Gwyn."

"Married ? Family man ? Anybody likely to come into the firm ?"

"No, he's an old bachelor, sir. Lives above his offices. One of the very few merchants who do that to-day. They tell me that he rarely goes out of his garden."

"Never mind his private life, Grymdyke—what business have we done with him ?"

"I'll look him up, sir."

"Business ! Business ! What does he do ?"

"Merchant bankers and shippers, same as ourselves, sir," said Grymdyke. "They were a wealthy firm years ago. Why—why they practically controlled the silver market ; then they sold out when they had got their price."

"Fools !" said Stradde. "They should have waited. Eh ? Eh, Grymdyke ?"

"Exactly, sir."

"And he never goes out ? Nor entertains ? Not doing much business these days ?"

"I believe he is a very charming old man, sir," said Grymdyke, adding casually : "I have been told that he hates women, but people talk like that about most middle-aged men who are bachelors."

Stradde didn't hear that ; his brain was working at the old speed.

"There is a firm, Gonzolas Hermanos in Chile," he said reflectively.

"Yes," said Grymdyke, "but I don't say whether or not the two firms are related. The Chile people are mostly in nitrates ; I believe some instructions were sent to our New York agents about them."

"Yes, yes," I remember," said Stradde. "I must take that matter up again."

He dismissed Grymdyke for the day.

"Tell the commissionaire that I am staying behind

for an hour," he said. "Naturally, I am not in to any caller."

Gonzolas! He couldn't get the name out of his mind. Yes, he remembered that the New York agent had warned them of imminent surprises in the nitrate business. He must get to know more about this Old Mulberry Tree. Excellent description for the head of a firm that was slowly fading away under the stress of modern times and methods. There would be great yawning cracks in the trunk of that tree, and spiders' webs would be strung across the cracks.

Stradde phoned down to the commissionaire on the floor beneath. He wanted to satisfy himself that the man was at his post of duty. Then he fell again to ruminating about Gonzolas. The brain stirred like a piece of oiled machinery. Then it picked up a thread of recollection and he was elated. Of course, he had the name now! Wasn't there a family tale about some transaction in Chile many, many years ago?—a transaction in which a Gonzolas and a Stradde were concerned?

He pushed back his chair and opened a door immediately behind the desk. In a small, sombre room were shelves of books—old, musty, calf-bound tomes—the private ledgers of Stradde and Partners, containing records of business through the ages. The founders of the firm had kept those ledgers for reference; their successors kept them out of a sense of pride. Business books! Figures, finance, balances, notes. Yet each book was full of romance!

Stradde opened three or four ledgers before he came upon that which he sought. There it was in the index: "Gonzolas Hermanos, page 71." Eagerly, almost feverishly, he turned to look for that page, and to his great surprise and chagrin found that it had been torn out! Incredible! A record of business ripped from a ledger! For what reason? Why had this thing been done? The dust on the binding convinced him that

the ledger hadn't been opened for years. Almost involuntarily, his finger slid down the index to the letter "S". Silver! That would be the reference. The firm's dealings in silver a hundred years ago! . . . "Page 13." And that page, also, had been torn from the records!

All particulars of transactions with Gonzolas Hermanos had been destroyed, or stolen!

He went back to his room and stared again at his writing-pad. Now it was the sobriquet, "Old Mulberry Tree", that began to chant in his brain. Of a sudden he sprang from his chair and smote the palm of his left hand with his right first. Dullard! Fool! Had his brain been so engrossed with business that it was incapable of remembering certain events that others might never forget for a moment during the whole of their life?

Of course, he knew Old Mulberry! He was known as Old Mulberry when he was a comparatively young man. He lived in that same house with his father. Edward Gonzolas was something more significant than an acquaintance. Why—why he was supposed to be in love with the woman whom Stradde had married! He recalled the wild scene when she refused to go on with the marriage. Her father was a martinet: he believed that young Stradde would accomplish miracles in the world of business and he was determined that his daughter should marry him. Damn Gonzolas, he had said. A foreigner, even if he were a naturalized Englishman! She had sobbed bitterly. Stradde could visualize the scene. She had flung herself down on the old horsehair sofa; her shoulders shook to her sobs. And her father had taken Stradde by the arm and led him from the room. "She'll come to her senses within an hour," he had said. "These romantic girls make me furious." Romantic! Stradde laughed cynically as he thought of romance in connection with his wife. She had never appeared to feel its breath.

He sat down at his desk again and wrote out a cheque

for five hundred pounds. He smiled as he wrote it. In that letter which he had dispatched to Hampstead he had told La Lune that he was likely to be out of town on the following day and must cancel the theatre engagement he had proposed. But he hadn't forgotten that it would be her birthday ! Along with the cheque he sent a note : "Supper to celebrate. I shall be back by ten o'clock and will call for you." He sealed the envelope and stamped it. He regarded the envelope rather sheepishly. Romance, he thought ! Why, he knew more about romance than Old Mulberry had ever dreamed. He was in the habit of twitting Hamshaw about his affairs, but what would Hamshaw say if he knew that. . . .

It was the strange fluttering and pecking at the window that caused him to drop the letter and stare affrightedly at the windows overlooking the courtyard. Foolish fears ! Only the City pigeons scrambling among themselves on the window ledge ; some of them were pecking at the window panes. Stradde went forward and looked out. From the window of an adjoining room somebody was throwing corn and scraps to the birds. He caught a glimpse of the outside messenger, Tom Slater, and went back to his chair. He rang for Slater.

"Well ?' he said sharply. "When did you return from Hampstead ?"

"Two minutes ago, sir," said Slater. "I didn't know you were still in the office or I should have come to you at once."

"Well ?"

"I delivered the letter, sir."

"Why—why did you come back to the office ? Is it your practice to return after the rest of the staff have left for the day ?"

"I—I often come back, sir, if—if the birds 'aven't been fed."

"Birds ?"

"The pigeons, sir. Sometimes I can't get back before the rest of the staff 'as gone and—and well, it's a little

job I wouldn't like to overlook. I'm sorry, sir, if I've done wrong."

"All right, Slater," said Stradde, and smiled benignly. "Post this letter downstairs as you go out."

Slater took the letter and went out thanking his stars that he was forgiven.

Stradde waited another half-hour, then he went down to his car. He instructed the chauffeur to drive slowly past the offices of Gonzolas Brothers. He caught a glimpse of the elderly bachelor in his garden, smiled at his thoughts, and drove homeward.

In the garden, Edward Gonzolas picked a small bunch of flowers—picked them very tenderly and with many a sigh. He packed the offering in a tiny cardboard box, addressed the package and walked the distance to the post office where he might post it to that house in Grosvenor Crescent. The name of the sender was not stated, but he knew that she would understand. It was her birthday, too, on the morrow. For thirty years he had remembered her birthday, and always it was a simple bunch of flowers that he sent.

Poor Old Mulberry Tree! Poor woman!

CHAPTER SIX

ONE of the happiest of men in all London that evening was Tom Slater, the outdoor messenger whose weekly salary in the service of Stradde, Hamshaw and Bleeker was exactly three pounds with the chance of adding to it if someone should be attracted by the smiling face and the obvious willingness to render a minor service.

Michael Stradde was wrong when he was disposed to contemn Slater for his lack of ambition. Stradde measured Heaven with a silver rule; Tom Slater measured life by the amount of real joy one might squeeze out of it without endangering the happiness of a neighbour. He filled his niche, and that can seldom be said of any man.

Slater, whimsical, was a tiny cog in the wheel of high finance. Nature had made him indifferent to the significance of vast sums of money: he could buy all the happiness he needed with a few shillings. There was nothing like envy of the rich in his heart. From the pound that Stradde had given him to take the message to Hampstead, he had cleared, as profit, nearly ten shillings! The skies had opened for him and poured down into his hands a fortune that couldn't be rightly appraised. He was wealthy. He laughed as he made his way to the Underground station, laughed as he gave the conductor on the train a cheery, "Hello, old top!" laughed as he settled himself in his seat, and was still laughing when he reached Farthing-Lane, Clapham, where he and his wife, Belinda, had two small rooms over the greengrocer's shop of Nathanial Potter, the fat, illiterate yet ambitious reader of political news. They were all friends—Slater, Potter and Belinda. The bond between

them was good-natured chaff. Potter called them his "constituency"; he hoped one day to espouse their cause in Parliament.

Potter was more than fond of the laughing Slater, who was so splendid a foil, or listener, when Potter was inclined to let himself go on political matters.

"Late to-night ?" said the greengrocer, as he shovelled a couple of cabbages into the net bag of a late customer.

"Been having tea with a Cabinet minister," said Tom, "and he didn't half say something about the Labour Party. Nasty, he was. Poisonous."

Mr. Potter gave his customer her change, set his hands on his hips and slowly wagged his large square head. His black eyes were naturally small, but set, as they were, in the midst of so much facial flesh, they seemed to be abnormally small. He gave Slater a pitying smile.

"One o' these days—" he began.

"I know," said Tom, who had heard it a thousand times. "One of these days you'll be in the Cabinet! You'll be telling the world who's who and what's what. Well, funnier things have happened. They'll take anything in Parliament nowadays."

"One of these days," said Mr. Potter, in dead seriousness. "I'll make you eat your words, Tom Slater."

"And if they're tougher than your cabbages, Potter," said Slater. "I'll be choked. . . . Belinda about ?"

"Belinda," said Potter, "is coming to hear me speak on the Common to-night."

"Like hell she is," said Tom. "We're going to the pictures. Who takes any notice of what you say about politics ?"

"One of these days——"

"Yes, when I'm dead."

"—I shall be standing in the 'Ouse of Commons telling them what I think of the way they're letting the country go to the dogs. You come along, Tom, and hear

what I've got to say to the crowd. When the next election comes you'll find me a pop'lar candidate for this division, and if I don't get in, it won't be the fault of my argyments. I've got a letter from one of the leading men in the party ; I'd like to show it to you."

"Boy," said Tom, "that can wait—the pictures can't." He made for the stairs leading to the first floor.

Mr. Potter eyed him sadly.

"How," he asked plaintively, "how can the country be saved from ruin when electors think more of rotten, immoral film stars than they do of their own country's good ?"

"Ask me," said Tom, and went up the stairs two at a time.

Belinda, the wife of the outdoor messenger, was contemplating the tea that she had prepared. Belinda was about two sizes too large for the room. She was ample of bosom, shrewd of eye, and somewhat harsh of voice. In an earlier day she might have been comely ; now she gave the impression of running to seed. She mothered her husband and, figuratively, was always reaching for the cane with which to punish or threaten him.

"Where have you been ?"

"Took a typist to dinner," said Tom flippantly.

"Who paid for it, you profligate ?"

"She did. Who do you think ?"

"That's better ! You haven't kissed me yet."

"You haven't asked me where you'd like to go to-night."

"The 'Prime Minister' is spouting on the Common," said Belinda. "We might as well take the air—it's cheaper than walking about wearing out good shoe leather."

"We're going to the pictures, old girl," said Tom decisively.

She eyed him suspiciously. The simple furniture in the room leaned forward to remind him that the next

instalment was almost due and extravagance, in the circumstances, would be sinful.

"And what are you going to use for money—pins ?"

Tom thrust a hand into a pocket and slammed some silver on the table. He told her of the luck that had come his way. They had been to the pictures twice instead of once that week, but why not again since they had come into a fortune ?

Belinda gathered up the coins and counted them carefully.

"They go into the savings box," she said authoritatively. "Pictures are getting on your brain."

He began to expostulate.

"But—but La Lune ! What about that dame ? Isn't she worth seeing a hundred times ?"

Belinda gave him a severe stare.

"You're getting crazy about that woman," she said. "I'm beginning to suspect you. I know these film vampires—they don't care whose husband they steal so long as they satisfy their beastly passions. We'll go on the Common and hear 'Disraeli' spout."

"Pictures," said Tom emphatically. "A fellow has to work too hard in the City to want to listen to a gasbag like Potter yapping at night."

Belinda handed him a cup of tea.

"I don't know why I married you," she said and sighed. "Potter says you have no ballast ; Emily (her sister) says you behave like you were keeping another woman. Why can't you take life seriously ?"

" 'Cause you'd hate me to," said Tom.

She watched him bite like a wolf at a slice of bread and butter.

"Were you joking about that typist you said you took to dinner to-night ?" she asked.

He arched his brows until the topmost wrinkle touched his hair.

"Was I ? Lovely girl ! Ginger hair ! What stockings she wears !"

"Given her by her boss, no doubt," said Belinda. "I know the game. They give you chocolates first, then it's silk stockings, then they take you to the theatre and a supper and they shove a drug into your coffee and——"

"Steady, old girl! What do you know about it?"

"And before an honest girl knows where she is, she's carrying a pack of trouble on her back."

"In front of her you mean, Belinda. Here, get your green frock on—the saucy one—and we'll take a peek at the lovely La Lune."

Belinda nodded affably, but she was waiting, woman-like, for more information of what the day had brought forth. Slater wasn't paid to keep his mouth shut; it wasn't considered necessary to warn him that office matters were secret.

"Everything all right at the office?" she asked.

"As far as I know," said Slater, reaching for the sugar.

"I read that Mr. Hamshaw gave evidence at an inquest."

"Oh, that! I heard 'em talking about it at the office, but what's that?"

"How's Mr. Stradde?"

"Cheery. You should have heard him talking to me about looking after my silver. Talked to me, he did, as nicely as you would."

"Why not? You're as good a man as he is."

"Now, now, Belinda!"

"Can't I look after your silver—when you have any?"

"Yes, but he didn't mean it in that way. He was giving me friendly advice."

"Tell him from me that the best thing he can give you is a rise in wages. I'll give you all the advice you need."

"I'll tell him," said Slater, good-temperedly. "The very next time we're golfing together, I'll tell him. I'll say: 'Look here, old fellow, Belinda says that if you don't pay me a couple of bob a week more she'll

withdraw me from your service. . . . And I saw Old Mulberry Tree to-day. I'd like to know more of him. Nice fellow, Belinda. You've seen George Arliss on the screen—haven't you ? Well, that's the sort of man he is. Tall and quiet, with one of them 'you-don't-know-what-I'm-thinking' looks in his eyes. He was in the Westchester bank the other day when I was paying in some stuff and the clerk was chipping me about silver——"

"Here, here ! What's the funny idea ? Why's everybody talking to you about silver ? Do you go whining among your City friends that I keep you short ?"

"All he said was : 'Hoarding it—ain't you, Tom ?' "

"I thought bank clerks was all gentlemen and didn't talk to customers."

"Everybody talks to me," said Slater proudly. "There ain't a clerk in the City that doesn't give me a wink. And it's always the same lately : 'How about silver ?' they say. Now——"

"Yes, now why should they talk like that ?" asked Belinda. "Have you been spreading the news that I waste your silver ? Men are like that when they get away from home. Always letting their wives down, making out they squander their wages. No, we don't go to the pictures to-night. We'll stay at home and save the money."

"Right," said Slater promptly. "You stay at home and I'll ring up the ginger typist. She'll go with me."

"What the dickens did you want to start on about silver for ? Did I say anything about it ?"

"No, but it seems to have put your temper on edge."

Belinda went behind his chair and reaching over his shoulder patted his cheek.

"Silver will never come between me and you, Tom, she said. "We'll go to the pictures, but I pay. Understand ? I pay. It shall be my treat to-night."

He sat bolt upright in his chair.

"Belinda ! Where did you get it ?"

"Saved it, of course. Saved it to spend again. That's what everybody ought to do with their small change—their silver. I've made myself miserable saving it and swearing to you that there wasn't a sixpence left in the house."

Slater pushed back his plate and stared at her in amazement.

"What's come over you, old girl?" he asked. "I've never heard you talk like this before."

"Just a wave of something—that's all, Tom," she said.

"Not the ginger typist?"

"Not in your life. I'm not afraid of any woman taking you from me. I'd have the pair of you back the next morning."

"True," said Tom reflectively, "and you're just the woman to see that we had a welcome."

"It might be warm," said Belinda.

"Don't spoil the dream," said he, and helped himself to another slice of bread and butter.

She watched him abstractedly.

"Mr. Hector is away—isn't he?" she asked of a sudden.

"Yes. He was no sooner home from abroad than he was off again. We all like Mr. Hector in the office. He'll be the boss one day."

"I've seen him only once," said the stout Belinda. "Now there *is* a man for you! I could understand a typist losing her head about him."

"Let's go off to the pictures," said Slater, "and I'll show you a woman—the most wonderful woman in the world."

"I hardly like refusing poor Potter," she sighed, glancing down into the street from the window. "He does love to fancy himself as a Member of Parliament."

"He loves to hear himself talk, you mean."

"He really believes in himself," said Belinda, "and that's half the battle in life—so I've been told. Couldn't

we give him just five minutes as we cross the Common. I'd like him to see us. After all, we owe him a little bit for vegetables."

Slater looked at her admiringly.

"It's you that ought to be in Parliament," he said. "You know how to tickle their vanity. Right-o! We'll give him two minutes."

They dressed and set out for the cinema. On the Common they came to the little group of loungers gathered around the portly Nathanial Potter. Slater waved a hand to the orator and affected interest in what was being said:

"What I say is this," cried Mr. Potter to the somnolent listeners, "we ought to get the rogues at the top instead of wasting so much time and public money on prosecuting the man-in-the-street for minor offences."

A lazy voice from the little crowd:

"Free beer and no work—that's what the labouring man's entitled to. Go on, guv'nor, I like you."

"Yes, my friend, and you'll like me more one of these days," shouted Mr. Potter. "You've heard of Mussilini, haven't you? That's the human tonic to stiffen the backbone of the old British Lion. He'd see that the idle rich didn't get away with their ill-gotten gains."

"Hang 'em! Hang 'em all," said the lazy voice.

Belinda felt that a word from her, even in opposition, would stimulate Mr. Potter.

"What have the rich been doing now that you want to hang 'em?" she asked.

Mr. Potter fixed her with a bead-like eye.

"Woman," he said stentoriously, "you don't read your newspaper. All you read is the cross-word competitions. The evil rich know that and they take advantage accordingly. They go on with their thieving knowing that the likes of you haven't the savvy to rumble 'em. Now, I ask you, what do you know about the money markets of the world?"

Belinda grasped her husband by the arm.

"You let him have one, Tom," she said. "You're in the City."

Mr. Potter threw a withering taunt at her.

"If I don't know, how can he possibly know?" he asked.

"Here, let's get off to the cinema," said Slater. "Whatever we owe him for his rotten vegetables he hasn't any right to talk at me like that."

Mr. Potter gave them a wink as to say: "I wasn't trying to be personal." He threw out a compelling hand towards the others in the group. "Things are happening at this very moment," he said. "Things are going to shake this world. There's a greed among the rich that you ain't likely ever to understand. They want to get control of all the money there is—your money included."

"They can have mine," said Tom Slater. "They won't buy racehorses with it."

"No," roared Mr. Potter, "but once they've made you a pauper they've got you as a slave. Up goes the prices of foodstuffs, prices of everything. You go into the slave galley. That's what they're aiming at. Money controls the world, my friends—don't forget that. It controls your life and your love and your home and your happiness. The money is getting into one corner, if you know what I mean. It needs to be spread, pushed into circulation so's trade can revive."

"Come on, Belinda," whispered Slater, "or we'll miss the opening of the picture. What's he know about money? I handle thousands every day but it don't worry me."

"Take silver . . . !" shouted Mr. Potter.

"Hell!" said Slater wearily.

"Take silver," Mr. Potter repeated. "There's somebody grabbing all the silver he can. Why? What's it mean to you?"

"Nix," said Slater. "Just plain nix."

"Silver," shouted the orator, "is the curse of the world."

"When you can't get it," said the lazy voice in the crowd.

"Exactly," said Mr. Potter. "And when the man or the men who are controlling the silver market get the lot in their grasp, you'll have nothing. You'll be skinned alive. Silver is the very devil. It ought to be stabilized, so's scoundrels couldn't exploit the market. In the East, where they recognize the silver standard, millions of workers are starving 'cause the price of silver here has been forced down and down until it ain't worth a damn and don't buy anything in the West. There's a curse on silver. Listen, who was it sold the Master for silver? Thirty pieces of it? That's only an allegory if you like."

"What's an allegory?" whispered Belinda.

"He don't know," said Tom. "Why waste any more time listening to him."

"And what happened to the Judas who sold Him?" cried Mr. Potter.

"I thought it was politics, not a religious meeting," said the lazy voice.

"Judas hanged himself from the branch of a tree," said the orator, "and that's what'll happen to these rascals who are trying to corner silver so's they can starve the industrial world into what they want to get."

"Well, what do they want?" asked Slater testily.

"What does anybody want with money—heaps of money?" asked the orator. "After they've bought all the luxuries they can find, all the steam yachts, all the white marble palaces, all the loose women with pretty faces. . . . What is there left for them to get with their money?"

"I'll buy the answer," said Slater desperately.

"Think it out for yourself," said Mr. Potter.

"Let's quit," said Belinda. "I don't like a politician

who forgets himself in public. What does he mean by loose women ? Tom, you wouldn't spend your money on loose women if you had a packet ?"

"I'll keep you guessing, Belinda," said Slater. He took her arm and they passed on across the Common.

CHAPTER SEVEN

IN the manager's office of the Hamlet Theatre, Bickerson, the florid satellite of Michael Stradde, played the enraged tiger and strode up and down, barking out warnings and threats to the self-composed critic, Swottham, who calmly rolled a cigarette with his thin, yellow-stained fingers, and waited till the storm subsided.

"The trouble with you critics," said Bickerson, snapping his false teeth, "is that you don't know your job."

Swottham nodded indulgently. He had heard that before somewhere.

"Give me a match, old man," he drawled.

"Why 'pan' Marguerite ? She's one of the finest——"

"One of the bummest actresses ever put up," said Swottham, lazily.

"What was wrong with her show ?"

"What was right ?" asked Swottham.

"Read this notice of yours in the *Argus*."

"Why should I ? I wrote it, old man."

"You describe her as a puppet that couldn't even dance properly to the pulling of the strings. That's absolutely libellous."

"Absolutely," said Swottham. "When is she going to issue a writ ?"

"Do you realize that Mr. Stradde——"

"Does he know more about the stage than I, Bickerson ?"

"He can get you fired like a shot. Didn't you know that he was behind Marguerite ?"

"Everybody knows it. What's that got to do with my criticism of your show ? Stradde doesn't pay me my salary."

"You don't know—nobody knows—whose salary he pays. "God knows what he'll say when he reads this notice of yours. I wouldn't like to be in your shoes."

"All right, old man. It's my funeral. Why should you get on your hind legs and rave. If I want to say that Marguerite is a damn rotten actress and that hundreds of damn good girls could have played the part better, I'm going to say it and all the Straddes in the world won't prevent me."

Bickerson wagged a warning finger.

"Supposing you heard that he holds a large interest in the newspaper you represent ?" he said.

Swottham yawned inelegantly.

"It wouldn't worry me if I heard he owned the lot," he said. "I'm paid to express my views of the London shows, not to boost Stradde's mistresses."

"You're a fool !"

"I'd rather be a fool than a—than—a——"

"Go on !" Bickerson's hands were clenched.

"I'd rather be a fool than a pimp," said Swottham. "There ! Laugh that off." He got up from his chair and moved slowly towards the door. He turned lazily around to have a final shot at the quivering, enraged Bickerson. "You heard what I called you," he said. "Go to Stradde and tell him. I don't give a damn for his frame of mind when he reads that notice of mine ; my job is to advise the public what it's likely to get for its money when it buys a ticket at the box office."

Bickerson was fuming beautifully.

"Fool ! Fool ! You're not the first that's chucked his job away."

Swottham hooked his thumbs under his armpits.

"Look here, Bickerson, you're not talking to a boy reporter," he said. "I know my job and I'm not afraid to stand up to Stradde or anybody else in this business. It's men like Stradde and you—yes, you—who have brought the London theatre to the straits in

which it finds itself. If these financial giants would keep in the City and not encroach on a profession that has nothing in common with them, the stage would be all the cleaner."

"Mr. Stradde is a patron of the arts!" roared Bickerson.

"Arts be damned!" said Swottham. "He's in it for sensation. He and others like him make a fortune out of damn fool investors and then think they can buy all the flesh there is on the stage. Suck that in. They couldn't persuade a decent woman to give them a second glance if they hadn't money: they buy, buy, just as any sex-mad fool buys when he goes into a brothel. There you are! That ought to keep you and Stradde busy talking for an hour. Tell him to go ahead! Get me fired if he can."

"He can! And he will!"

"And while you're about it, Bickerson, tell him that he may be able to buy the silver of the world, but it will take him a hell of a long time to buy the Press. That's all I've got to say. I can't think of any more at the moment. Issue that writ for libel, and then put Marguerite in the witness-box. And Michael Stradde!"

Swottham strolled out with a cheery, "S'long!"

Bickerson sat down at his desk, ripped the newspaper cutting to fragments and ground his teeth in impotent rage. What fools these newspaper critics were! Flinging away their bread and butter! Poseurs! Fancy, daring to flout the power of Michael Stradde! Crazy! Crazy!

The telephone bell rang. Bickerson reached for the receiver with nervous fingers. It was about the time that Stradde should ring through.

"That you, Bickerson?"

"Yes, Mr. Stradde."

"Seen the notices?"

"Some of them are awfully good, Mr. Stradde. Of course, you can't always get a unanimous Press."

"Are you trying to teach me my business. The notices were rotten."

"I've just had a word with that swine Swottham He's been here," whispered Bickerson.

"And I've just read his criticism of the show," said Stradde.

"The fellow's mad, Mr. Stradde. He's a danger. He's irresponsible. I don't know why his editor tolerates him."

"I do, Bickerson"—coldly—"He tolerates him because he isn't afraid to write the truth. The show *was* rotten! *Damned* rotten! If it doesn't improve in the next two days, put up the notices. Got that?"

"Click!" The receiver at the other end of the wire had been banged back on its hook. Bickerson stumbled out of his chair, unlocked a cupboard and helped himself to a stiff whisky-and-soda. It was easier to understand swine like Swottham than a contrary taskmaster like Stradde.

CHAPTER EIGHT

IT was late afternoon. Members of the staff of Stradde, Hamshaw and Bleeker were preparing to leave for the day. In none of the departments had there been the slightest sign of anything untoward, nothing to give rise to that conjecturing which is common to clerks when the expression on the face of a manager suggests trouble or perplexity. So far as the majority were concerned, business was taking its normal course.

The old routine was being followed with monotonous regularity—ships and merchandise, coal and contracts, rustling of pages, thumping of ledgers as they were closed and pushed back into their niche; boom of street traffic coming only faintly through the open windows; doors swinging and closing; dreary, humdrum among the figures while the clock ticked on. Unimaginative clerks longing for only the close of the day's work so that they might get back to their suburban homes, their tennis, or their gardens. No dreaming of the fleet belonging to the firm—the green of the oceans where the ships sailed, the lagoons, the tropical foliage. Captains came in, their voyage done; captains went out with their new commands. Bluff, mahogany-hued seadogs, taking their orders with a smile and a nod and pitying the poor devils who had to pass their life straining over a desk in the heat of a City office. "Captain, you're going to the Fijis this trip." "Yes, sir," quietly, resignedly, happily. Going to the Fijis! Thank God for any command that might take them from the hive where men lived to calculate columns of figures and fill fountain-pens and whisper about the tennis of the previous evening, or the height of the hollyhocks in the back garden.

There was to be a new conference of the partners. Usually it was a weekly ceremony, but this was the second that had been held that week. Nothing unusual in that to excite the interest of the clerks. Grymdyke was nervous about it, but his face was a waxen mask. Bleeker was fretting, but he concealed his agitation behind a display of irritability in matters of small import. Hamshaw was grimly apprehensive, but he betrayed only the hauteur of the well-groomed partner to whom clerks and heads of departments were no more than pawns employed to pile up balances for the firm. Hamshaw had arranged to meet a party of his wife's friends that evening down in his Surrey home, but Bleeker had warned him that certain phrases of the business could wait no longer, Stradde must be compelled to face the situation! Bleeker would rather face the devil in a tantrum.

The chairs had been placed in position around the oval mahogany table in the Board-room. There was a carafe of water for the junior partners, two siphons of soda-water for the chief. The blinds were drawn to shut out the glare of the late afternoon sun.

Tom Slater, the outdoor messenger, was feeding his beloved pigeons for the last time that day. He talked to them as usual, giving them names which they appeared to answer, chiding them for gluttony, coaxing some to come nearer and have their polls scratched.

Grymdyke advised the junior partners that the chief was already in his place, then he took up his accustomed post of vigil so that there should be no intrusion. Grymdyke knew that a crisis had been reached, but the face of an idol would have been more informative. Grymdyke was so well-trained that he would have merely nodded indifferently if he had been warned that an earthquake was about to shatter the world.

Mr. Hamshaw passed into the Board-room and gave Stradde a curt nod as he took his place at the table.

Stradde was looking through a sheaf of reports which his secretary had placed in front of him before withdrawing. Stradde's countenance was that of the stern, implacable leader who knew that not the least of his tasks in the campaign on which he had entered was to stiffen the backs of his lieutenants. He knew, too, that the best way to stiffen them, pump courage into them, was to play the bully, sneer at them for their apparent cowardice and whip them to heel if necessary.

Mr. Bleeker came in and seated himself opposite Hamshaw. He brought with him a bundle of papers which were for the edification of the chief.

Hamshaw got up and locked the door without consulting the wishes of the chief. He went back to his chair and gave Bleeker a nod as to say: "Things have reached the point where we must speak out."

"Now," said Stradde, "let's get our business over as quickly as possible. I have two or three important appointments this evening." He looked at Bleeker. "What have you got to place before me?" he asked.

Hamshaw took up the gage of battle for the other partner.

"We have only one thing to discuss," he said. "We must come to an understanding about our holdings in silver. Where, exactly, are we?"

Bleeker said: "I want at least two hundred thousand this month for my department. That new ship——"

Stradde cut him short.

"I know what you want," he said. "You want some further reassurance about the holdings which I have dictated. You're worrying."

"We are," said Hamshaw. "Frankly, we're wondering how it's going to end. "This buying of silver is either madness or——"

"Genius," Stradde suggested, and smiled wickedly. "I bought again to-day. Loewenstein is buying heavily to-morrow. Well? Which department is in need of

money? Bleeker's is doing all that can be expected of it."

"Everybody in the City is talking about our holdings in silver," said Hamshaw.

Stradde helped himself to soda-water. He set down the empty glass with a defiant bang.

"It's the old fight—is it? You're losing your nerve?"

"Let's approach it without acrimony," said Hamshaw. "We are up to the necks in silver and you know as well as I do that silver is falling steadily and will continue to fall."

Stradde's eyes narrowed; there was contempt in every line of his face as he regarded Hamshaw. From the manner in which he deliberately turned from Bleeker it was obvious even to that gentleman that the chief had little regard for his intellect. There was nothing of the irrational in the chief's eyes: silver might be obsession with him even as Hamshaw believed, but on this evening he was in full command of every one of his faculties. He was the fighter from head to foot—the visionary, maybe, but the shrewd calculating financier who had steered his course towards an objective and was determined that nothing and nobody should divert it. He studied the faces of his partners and realized that they were prepared to fight against his plans; he was ready to argue them out of their timidity.

Hamshaw read at least a part of what was passing in Stradde's mind, and he was sufficiently wise to appreciate this fact: whatever his enemies might say about Michael Stradde they couldn't deny that his was probably the most capable brain in the City, when it came to summing up a situation, foreseeing a climax, a trend. If there were occasions when this silver fever seemed to bite into his brain and make him almost inhuman towards other phases of life, it couldn't be gainsaid that the Big Idea wasn't soundly based. He was a prince of gamblers and he was throwing for a stake

so large that the imagination shrank from the contemplating of it.

Stradde sat back in his chair and regarded each of his partners as a lawyer might regard a client who had come to seek his advice but was obviously withholding something.

"For the last time," he said firmly, "I shall explain to you the situation as it appeals to me. Why am I in silver? And at a time when everybody else in the City is standing clear of it? I've given up the whole of my life to a study of the silver market. It isn't a passing craze with me. This firm was watching silver before you or I were born. Let me get down to simple facts. By God, you make me think that I'm teaching a couple of children their alphabet."

"Give us something to go upon," said Hamshaw. "You must admit that we've been very indulgent."

Stradde's eyes blazed dangerously.

"Indulgent? You? Who the devil are you to talk to me in that strain? I've told you that I'll buy out your holdings if you wish it."

"Let us try to be calm," protested Hamshaw.

Stradde said: "Sorry, Hamshaw. You make me lose my temper, and it's a ticklish time in which to do that. Right! Let's approach it calmly, if we can. Now, with the exception of China and India nearly all the countries of the world have adopted the gold standard. I've no fault to find with that, but the War came, and what has happened since?"

Hamshaw propped his chin in his hands and gave Bleeker a sign which, interpreted, meant: "Better to let him have his lead without interrupting."

"The War came," Stradde repeated, "and the output of gold is not sufficient for the world's requirements. Mark my words! Within a few years America, France, and Holland will be holding practically *all* the gold."

"All?" said Hamshaw, startled out of his lethargy.

"With the exception of about five hundred million," said Stradde, adding, with a shrug: "a mere flea-bite, in the hands of all other countries. Listen! My view is that America—that vast continent of enterprise—will be holding, one day, so much gold that she will be unable to do anything with it.

Bleeker found the courage to interpose with the whimper:

"Yes, but does America realize that? What does Wall Street think about it?"

Stradde gave him a withering look, then smiled at his own thoughts. A little melodrama was good for men of the Bleeker type when they were wavering.

"America," he said, infusing theatricality into his voice, "thinks, to-day, as she thought years ago. What, I ask you, did William Jennings Bryan say when he was fighting for the free coinage of silver—when gold was threatening the country he loved?"

Bleeker wagged his head: he didn't know: he didn't care.

"I have a memory," said Stradde, pompously. "Bryan declared, and his words rang through that vast continent: 'You shall not press down upon the brow of labour this crown of thorns; you shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold.' There you are, Bleeker! You think, at the back of your mind, that I have no thought for labour. You're wrong. Until silver comes into its own, Labour must suffer, must continue to be crucified."

Bleeker appealed dumbly to Hamshaw.

"We're listening," said Hamshaw, dryly.

"It's simple," said Stradde. "Other countries, not having gold, will be unable to trade with America, and she can't go on producing goods if there's no market for them."

Hamshaw gave himself a shake. Why let this self-supposed Colossus get it into his head that he was the only one in the firm with brains. He interrupted with

the reminder that since the War there had been much debasement of silver by the Germans—silver currency had been called in as much as possible and melted down again without regard for its intrinsic worth—the alloy preponderated—the silver returned to the public circulation was not worth its supposed value. The gold standard countries of the West had reduced the value of silver so that the East, when it came to trade, found that twenty shillings of their silver represented only a tithe of the value of the gold sovereign. They couldn't afford to buy in those circumstances.

Stradde listened patiently—patiently for him. He half-closed his eyes and there was just the faintest spark of contempt in their light.

"I'm afraid, Hamshaw," he said, "that your trouble is lack of foresight. You live for to-day when you should be thinking of to-morrow."

Bleeker's voice sidled in—a squeak, an apologetic voice.

"I must have money for my department. It can't wait."

Stradde didn't take the trouble to reply to him. Bleeker, to him, in that moment, was a hoarder of pennies. He had absolutely no vision. He spoke to Hamshaw :

"All these years," he said, "you have granted that I do know something about my business. Lately, you have conceived the notion that I have lost my balance. Don't interrupt. I know. I can read your mind—it is so easy to read. You are too ready to listen to the people in the City. What the hell do they know about our business if they can't make a success of their own ?"

"We're here to help each other," said Hamshaw, coldly.

"Exactly," said Stradde, but he didn't place much value on their help. "You want me to defend my position. Very well. Everybody seems to think that it's a mad thing to do—to buy and hoard silver with

the view of selling when the right moment arrives. Hundreds of arguments can be advanced to prove that silver will never again reach a point that will enable us to make a profit on our holdings. I say, with conviction, that the time is near at hand when it will reach a point as high, if not higher, than in 1921. The demand for silver is near! Why? Because there is not sufficient gold to go around among those countries that recognize only the gold standard. Think me crazy if you will, but I insist that we ought not to have debased our silver coinage. We made a few millions after the War by selling the pure silver and countenancing the debasement but it was a step that is bound to bring about disaster."

The fire of fanaticism came into his eyes as he went on, but Hamshaw found himself being drawn into agreement with the sentiments expressed—just as Stradde had drawn others in.

"Mark my words, Hamshaw! The day will come when not only shall we have to bring silver coinage back to its real value—that is, a shilling to be the twentieth part of a gold sovereign—but we shall go back to bimetallism: silver shall be a legal and proper tender. We shall be able to pay any creditor country with gold *and* silver. By God, I'll go further, and say that, within ten years, this country will be in a bankrupt state unless it has adopted the silver as well as the gold standard!"

He broke off to drink greedily of his wretched soda-water. He came back to his chair with the mien of an orator who knows he has forced home a point and is giving it time to sink in.

"True," he resumed, "things will not be the same as they were years ago. Those who bewail our loss of trade with India and China will be disappointed if they think that the reinstatement of silver will encourage India and China to buy from us as in the past. Those countries have moved with the years. They have their

own factories, or, if they haven't, they can buy cheaper in Japan where labour is cheap. My memory is long, Hamshaw"—how he seemed to delight in ignoring Bleeker!—"and it goes back about twenty years to a time when the Premier of Japan, Count Okuma, addressed a Chamber of Commerce in Kobe. He said: 'In India, there are three hundred millions of people crying out to Japan for succour from the oppression of the British.' That's something to think about. We were friendly with Japan at the time. He wasn't talking about military oppression, but what the effect of silver fluctuations might mean."

He waited for comment. None was forthcoming. His lips curled slightly; a sense of his greater brain power overwhelmed him. He began again, this time treating them as though they were children in a classroom and he the teacher.

"What, after all, is gold? Only a metal chosen as a token of exchange. So is silver. Silver has been legal tender since the beginning of the world's commerce. Solomon—all the kings of Egypt—had gold, but they didn't use it as coin of exchange. They used silver. And so it must come again into its rightful place. You are saying to yourselves that I am bombastic—that I am a fool crying in the wilderness. Let the world outside this business of ours go on believing that until the moment to strike has arrived.

"As you know, I haven't always bought. I have sold silver when prices were high and bought again at a profit. We have averaged our holdings, although I confess that we cannot go on much longer as the strain on our general business becomes too heavy." His voice had become hoarse. Never before had they known him to talk so vehemently, or take so much trouble to defend and explain his position. The sweat was standing out on his forehead and beneath his eyes: he stumbled, rather than walked, to the soda-water siphon and drank. He went back to his place, but

he made a sign that implied his inability to say more to convince them. Let them leave him to his thoughts—that was what he intimated by that imperious gesture. They were his partners, but, by God, they ought to be able to realize that if it were not for him and his brain power the firm would be one of the many in the City that carried on from day to day without hope of achieving that triumph which alone can make labour worth while.

Silently, Hamshaw and Bleeker got up from their place at the table and moved towards the door. They left him sitting there, staring at nothing, his hands gripping the arm-rests of his chair, his jowl heavy, his chin thrust out defiantly.

How could they hope to argue against a man of his calibre? His will power was tremendous. He would suffer the extreme of physical hurt rather than be swayed from his purpose. They could quit the sinking ship if they believed it to be sinking: he wouldn't call them back. He would stand on the bridge until the rails touched the water: he would go down with the hulk but the gleam of defiance would still be in his eyes.

He had impressed Hamshaw. He had forced his own personality on him until Hamshaw felt that it was a great honour to be associated with so mighty a giant in this titanic struggle to gain supremacy in the world of high finance.

Stradde had convinced Hamshaw that if he were insane it was the insanity of genius. What could turn him from the obsession that gripped him? Other giants in the City were pigmies by comparison. What human agency could bring about the defeat of a man like Michael Stradde who, having set his heart upon victory in the chosen field, would fight on to the bitter end—until he was crushed and abandoned, naked to his enemies, a prey to the meanest bucket-shop runner.

They had reached the door—Hamshaw and Bleeker—

when there came a noise from without that crashed with ridiculous force on their nervous system. . . .

"Get out of my way!"

Michael Stradde heard it too. He threw back his head, and his brows came down in a threatening frown. Hamshaw's hand was on the door-knob; he withdrew it quickly and looked back at his chief. He spoke in a hollow tone of voice:

"*Hector!*"

Stradde nodded but made no attempt to rise from his chair.

Hector's voice was raised in the corridor—Grymdyke was expostulating with him.

"Get out of my way!"

Then Grymdyke's voice:

"Please, Mr. Hector! The partners are in serious conference."

"Get to *hell* out of my way!"

"I beg of you——"

"Get out of my way, Grymdyke! Stand away from that door."

Stradde smiled sardonically—not at the rumpus outside but at the ashen faces of his partners. Bleeker was bowed at the knees: his hands were making frantic passes at the air. Hamshaw was leaning against the door, wondering what was the wisest thing to do.

"I should open the door," said Stradde calmly, reading his thoughts. And picking up some papers from the table, he began idly to turn them over. He was still looking at them when the door was flung open and Hector literally rushed into the room.

Hector's whole appearance would have startled the ordinary man. His collar was torn (where he had wrestled with the weaker Grymdyke); his face was wet with perspiration; there was blood trickling away from the corners of his mouth; his hair was dishevelled; his hands were clenched. He had come back from the South of France; he had learned of the tragedy in

the Grosvenor Crescent house; he had learned of the manner in which his uncle had ground his iron heel into the neck of Felice's father until death had mercifully freed the broken man from further pain. He had seen Felice! And he had seen the hell of his uncle's creating.

He strode towards the table, then halted abruptly two paces from Michael Stradde's chair.

The two junior partners were standing in the background, holding their breath, waiting for the crash they believed to be imminent. Why didn't Michael Stradde spring to his feet? Why didn't he make ready to defend himself from the fury that menaced him.

Stradde's voice came as gently as a summer zephyr. He didn't take his gaze from his papers as he drawled:

"Well, Hector? And what can I do for you to-day?"

Hector's lips opened, but no sound came from them.

"We were in conference," said Stradde, still in that gentle, musing tone of voice, and the note of admonishment was only faintly to be detected. "Your business must be of great import since you couldn't wait half an hour."

Then the flood-gates opened. Hector smashed at the table with his fist.

"Who the hell do you think you're talking to?" he shouted. "A child?"

Slowly, Stradde turned in his chair. The smile left his face. In his eyes there came a bitter, vindictive gleam.

"Are you addressing yourself to me?" he asked, and tooth was set on tooth as he got to his feet. He seemed in that minute to tower above his nephew: his broad shoulders became broader; his great neck was bull-like; the deep, expansive chest swelled visibly in his anger. "How dare you?"

Hector gave his head a shake as if he would rid it of the clamour that was within, in it—shook it as a retriever will when it leaves the water.

"They tried to keep me out," he said, and he was

breathing hard and fast. "Your damned secretary and his commissionaire. Tried to keep me out! Your damned sychophants! Me!"

Hamshaw regained a little of his self-control.

"Hector," he began.

Hector swung upon him in a fury.

"Shut up, you rat!" he shouted. "When I've settled with this—this *murderer*, by God! I'll attend to you."

Hamshaw fell back in dismay. Stradde made a gesture with his hand. They had better leave this young man to him.

"What's the meaning of this conduct?" he asked, and his voice was grim and threatening. "Have you been drinking? Where have you come from? Quick! Out with it!"

Hector felt an access of strength.

"Where have I come from?" he jeered. "You dare to ask me that? I've come from the side of the woman who was to have been my wife."

"This is a business office," said Stradde, cynically.

Hector raised his hand as though he would strike. "Don't sneer—damn you!"

Hamshaw cried out: "Hector! For Heaven's sake calm yourself."

Stradde didn't flinch.

"What has your—your *woman* to do with me?" he asked.

"My God! You're asking me to kill you."

"If you can." Stradde's bulky figure moved slightly as though it were deliberately placing itself in position to receive the killing blow if it could be delivered. "What about this woman?"

"I've just left her. She's another of your victims."

"You've taken leave of your senses," said Stradde. "Sit down and calm yourself, and I'll send for a doctor to give you something to settle your nerves."

"You've wrecked her life."

"Fool!"

"You killed her father!"

"He killed himself. What has that to do with me?"

"You—you and these two partners of yours killed him as certainly as though you fired the shot that ended his life."

"I have no time for melodrama. What the devil do you mean by coming back from a business trip in this condition?"

"Business trip! It was no business trip. It was a plot to get me out of the way. But I'm here! I'm here to make you pay for all you've done."

"Do you realize that you're talking to me, your uncle."

"Damn the relationship! I know that I'm talking to a man, a fiend, who doesn't care a hang who sinks so long as he swims."

"I keep you! Do you appreciate that?"

"You—you swine! Why—why did you do it? He was lying dead in the house when you sent me on that fool's errand."

"I've forgotten it."

"You'll never forget it."

"I've forgotten everything save that you are an ingrate."

"You'll remember, remember, all the days of your life. You killed Sir Gerald. You shattered the mind of my dear Felice, his daughter. You didn't care. Silver, silver, silver! That's all that operated in your diseased mind."

"Get out of this office before I send for the police."

"Send for them? You dare not. . . . Silver, silver!"

"From this day you don't belong to me."

"I never did belong to you."

"I keep you no longer."

"I've worked for every penny I've taken out of this—damnable office."

"You clear out. Anywhere. Go anywhere. Earn your living."

"I can do that. . . . Silver! Silver! By God, I'll make you rue the day you ever thought of hoarding silver."

"You?" Stradde laughed mockingly.

"Yes, I shall make you rue," said Hector, and he was gaining control of his temper. Now a fierce bitterness had settled on him. A great resolve had come to him. "From this day onward you shall have all the silver you want," he said. "I'll build it up around you until you won't be able to breathe." He swung around to the shaking partners. "And you two shall be within the ring. By God! I'll make your coffins of silver."

"Get out!" said Stradde, fiercely. "I have no time to waste on fools. Get out, and see to it that you are out of my house before I return this evening."

Hector raised his hands again as though he would strike the towering, bullying figure to his feet. Then slowly he allowed his arms to hang by his sides. He nodded to the thoughts that raced through his mind.

"All right," he said, and his calmness now was more terrible than the rage of a few moments before, "I'll get out. But the time will come when you'll go on your knees and beg me to come back."

"Close the door from the outside," said Stradde, unemotionally.

The door was closed. For Stradde, at least, the episode was over. He began again to study his papers and looked up to see his partners standing in awe because of what had happened.

"I don't suppose we can get any further this evening," he said. "We'll resume the conference after I have had a report from Loewenstein."

Hamshaw said:

"Hector—your nephew—what of him?"

Stradde frowned.

"What's the matter with you?" he asked rudely.

"It was final—what you said?" Hamshaw couldn't believe that Hector had been dismissed.

Stradde sneered brutally.

"Do you think I waste my breath on anybody, Hamshaw?" he asked. "To me, he's dead already." He gathered up his papers and walked to the door. "I want ten minutes alone in my room," he said. "I'll say good evening."

He went out, leaving the two staring at each other in wonderment.

There had been a storm in the brain of the Colossus during the whole of that scene with Hector, but it settled within five minutes after Stradde entered his private room. He sat down at his desk and went quickly and thoroughly through the letters which Grymdyke placed before him for signing. He talked as he signed.

"Mr. Hector will not be returning to the office, Grymdyke. . . . What's this letter to Brent and Dean? Oh! All right. . . . You will see to it that all papers and matters that were in his charge while he was here are collected and brought to me for safe deposit. . . . Get my car around. . . . This letter should have been attended to before, Grymdyke. You're getting slack—aren't you? . . . Better stay late to-night, Grymdyke—up to eight o'clock. I'm expecting a cable from New York and you can bring it around to Grosvenor Crescent. Better have something to eat. . . . And, Grymdyke, I want you to see Mr. Bleeker to-morrow and go through his requisitions with him. There are several matters in which you may be able to help. Understand?" He prepared to leave.

CHAPTER NINE

MICHAEL STRADDE motored straight to Hampstead. He was feeling the effects of that scene with his partners and Hector; his nerves were jangled. Why the devil couldn't they see eye to eye with him? Why hadn't they his imagination? Didn't it matter to them? Money and so much money that the world must bend its knee in homage? Why had he tolerated the pair of them so long? Bleeker wasn't worth considering; he knew his job as a mechanic knew his job—his handling of the shipping department was excellent up to a point, but a well-trained clerk could do as much. The brain power was his—his—Michael Stradde's. Bleeker might never have been more than a suburban clerk if it hadn't been for him. Damn the fellow, he had made a gentleman of him—the only sort of gentleman that mattered in this modern day. He had become no more than a machine.

As for Hamshaw! The trouble there, was Hamshaw's wife! She was that type of woman who believed that all she had to do in return for a liberal allowance was to make a man's bed comfortable—on occasion. Empty-headed, painted doll, full of conceit, vain as a bantam, incapable of sustaining a conversation unless it dealt with fashion and scandal. Yet she might be useful in a way she herself could never dream of. She might be an excellent foil. Play up to her vanity and Hamshaw would be compelled to do exactly what Stradde wished him to do.

Fancy Hamshaw marrying a woman of that description! It rather betrayed the business ineptitude of Hamshaw. He ought to have married a woman who would have helped him to become a king among

financiers. Hamshaw had allowed the damnable weakness of the ordinary man to subordinate all those instincts that make for greatness—the sex weakness. Hamshaw was flattered when other men flattered his painted, fluffy wife: he fancied that they were paying homage to his power of selection! If only Hamshaw had met a woman like Mauvine! Ah! Mauvine! *There* was a woman who might lead a man from the foot to the mountain-top and ask no more than a smile of appreciation.

When he reached the Hampstead house he felt in need of soothing influence. He wasn't ready to admit that the Hector incident had upset his nerves, but he knew that it had. If he had ever loved anyone it was Hector, but he joyed in what he called his tremendous will-power. "Look!" he had said to Mauvine one night. "You think you understand me, but you don't. I don't understand myself. I might love a person or thing so intensely that I would give my life for its preservation, and yet I could fling it away as though it were no more than a trifle. That's me. There is always compensation in this life." She had done no more than smile rather sadly.

The footman appeared to be surprised that he should have called.

"Madam left early this evening," he said. "I do not expect her back till midnight."

Stradde betrayed no surprise although a fierce rush of jealousy went through him.

"Dining out, I suppose?" he said. "I fancy she told me, but I have been so busy to-day."

"Lord Pynton called, Mr. Stradde," said the footman.

"Oh, of course! Of course!" said Stradde, as though he had suddenly remembered an intimation. "Just say that I called on my way home."

Jealousy! He had so often denied it! Hadn't it been understood that she would await him that evening?

Usually when she was called away on unexpected business she telephoned him at the office. Damn this fellow Pynton. Who was he? What was his aim? What was in Mauvine's mind regarding him?

He went back to his limousine and said curtly to the chauffeur:

"Hamlet Theatre."

Bickerson, the manager, met him in the office.

"The receipts are down slightly," said Bickerson, fearfully, "but they are bound to jump in the course of a few days."

"Are the notices up?" Stradde asked curtly.

Bickerson said he had taken it upon himself to wait a few days until he was certain. . . .

"Who's financing this show?" asked Stradde. "Put your own notice up at the same time."

Bickerson cringed. He had to fight for his job, but he didn't know how to fight. Of course, he seized on the first and the wrong weapon.

"Everybody is talking about the show, Mr. Stradde," he said, "and to-night we are favoured by the presence of the famous film star, La Lune. She is here with Lord Pynton and appears to be enjoying the performance immensely."

"Really," said Stradde, coldly. Then, with intense bitterness that amazed the sychophant: "Put notices up *twice*—in big black letters! Understand? If any other fool wishes to carry on, let him. I can't afford to lose any more money."

He sat down in the manager's office and looked around for the soda-water. Hastily Bickerson placed it before him.

There came a tap at the door. Bickerson glanced at his master for instructions. Stradde nodded. He had a faint idea that it might be Mauvine herself.

It was Marguerite, the star in the play. She had an act "off"; she had heard that the great man was in the house and had rushed around in her make-up.

Stradde gave Bickerson another look. It meant: "Get out."

Bickerson went out, closed the door, and remained on guard outside. Perhaps, he thought, Marguerite would be able to placate the magnate and so keep the show going.

Marguerite sidled towards Stradde and rested a hand on his shoulder. She was seeking permission to sidle on his knee as he sat there, his eyes staring straight in front of him, his clenched hand resting on the table. He might not have recognized her.

"I—I don't think you love me any more," she whimpered.

"Don't be familiar," said Stradde irritably.

She shrank away from him.

"Something—somebody has upset you? Yes?"

"Yes," he said, brutally—"you."

"I have failed you in the show?"

"You have failed the Press—that's all that matters."

"You are going to close down?"

"Naturally. What do you think I am—a fool?"

She began to cry and went near him. She dared to stoop and kiss him on the cheek. He wiped the "paint" away with an impatient gesture.

"You are so wonderful," she babbled childishly.

He frowned ominously. The woman affronted him.

"Look, dear man!" She had less art in this business than she had on the stage. She had drawn aside her kimono—the simple wrap her dresser had thrown over her shoulders when she rushed from her dressing-room to the office on learning that he was in the house. Her bosom was exposed. She leaned forward as though she were satisfied that she could always rely on the last weapon of a thwarted woman.

Stradde reached across the table and touched the bell.

Bickerson came in.

"Take this woman away," said Stradde. "I want to talk business with you."

The door closed on her. Bickerson crept back—poltroon that he was.

"There is a magnificent girl playing a small part—" he began.

Stradde sprang to his feet.

"Close down the show immediately," he said, and walked out of the office.

From his own box (a box he seldom used), he looked along the lines of stalls, concealing himself behind the curtain. He saw Mauvine, she who was known as La Lune. Never had he seen her look so radiant. There was a wrapt expression in her eyes, the beautifully-moulded head was held slightly forward as though she were afraid to miss a single word that was being spoken on the stage. The silver gown that had become essential to her personality from the point of view of publicity, caught the golden light shed from the stage: the whole of her lithe form seemed to quiver in ecstasy. Beside her was the austere Lord Pynton, arrogantly erect in his seat, yet obviously conscious of the glances that were shot from all parts of the house at the woman by his side.

Stradde smiled, dropped the curtain into position, and made his way to the vestibule. Bickerson was following him, fearful, hopeful, one hand held out in a gesture of appeal. Stradde stepped into his waiting car and said through the speaking tube:

"To Mr. Hamshaw's place in Surrey. Move!"

The car slipped away as though it were human and had heard the command before it reached the ears of the chauffeur.

Stradde lit a cigar and stared at the traffic ahead. He was smiling to himself—that grim smile that was half-sneer. Pynton? Who the devil was Pynton? What was his object in cultivating the company of La Lune? Had he any money? Had he any influence?

Could he get money—big money at a moment's notice ? Or was he just another of the titled puppets who were ready to sacrifice all they understood by social dignity in order to form a closer acquaintance with Michael Stradde ?

In the theatre, Bickerson went back to his office and helped himself to two stiff whiskies. Swottham, that rrepressible, looked in.

"Hullo, Bick !"

"Hullo !"

"Putting up the shutters—aren't you ?"

"Who the hell told you that ?"

"My common-sense. Didn't I see Stradde go out of the house ?"

"You see more than you ought to see."

"That's why they pay me a bigger salary than the boy critics who slobber all over you, Bick. Cheer up ! The show is bum. Why try to hide it ? Money will never keep a rotten show going. Not even the money of a Stradde, no matter who happens to be his mistress."

"Have a drink ?" (He was wondering if Swottham could be useful to him.)

"Sorry, I'm on the wagon. Why don't you try it ? If I were not on the wagon I should be fired to-morrow. Why ? Because every manager of every bum show in London has it at the back of his mind that a couple of drinks can square any critic. By the way, I haven't been fired yet."

"I don't know what you're talking about ?"

"Oh, yes, you do. You said that Stradde would get me fired for telling the truth about this Punch and Judy show. Ha, ha ! That rather let you down in my estimation, Bick. I don't see Stradde as often as you do, but I know his character better. I'd lay you two to one that he'd give me your job to-morrow if I asked him for it. But I hate the swine."

"Get to hell out of my office," said Bick, moodily.

"Don't be rude—there's a good fellow. It may be my office to-morrow, you know. Here's a bit of advice: when you have a man like Stradde to deal with always keep your end up; never give him the impression that you're ready to lie down on the floor so that he may wipe his feet on you. Men like Stradde like nothing so much as a punch on the jaw—metaphorically, I mean. Good night!"

"Good night," said Bickerson.

When the door closed, Bickerson helped himself to yet another sedative. His sallow face made even his dress shirt look dirty. He hated Stradde; he hated the money that made Stradde his master. What the hell did Stradde know about Art? Why should these moneyed men be able to come into the profession and treat it as though it were no more than an adjunct to the oldest profession in the world? In a few minutes, he surmised, Marguerite would come into the office, her make-up off, her temper ablaze. She had been cast aside: Stradde had no use for her. She would rant and rave and accuse everybody of having conspired to "kill" her show. She would look at him—Bickerson—and dissect him with that look. She would say to herself—though her eyes would be more eloquent than tongue—that he was no more than a pimp and didn't know his job even in that sphere of sin. Damn Stradde! He would yet come by his desserts: other magnates who had slithered like serpents into the profession and tried to wreck it with their lasciviousness, had found the wave of public contumely sweeping over them. Damn him again! He was of the type that used money to "buy" the flesh of the theatre and regale his equally lascivious friends with it when his own appetite was soured, or he needed to cajole them into bolstering up his fraudulent financial schemes.

Marguerite came in. The curtain was down. She was ready to go home. She was redolent of perfume and grease paint—that nauseating odour that nothing

seems capable of dissipating—the smell of stale fat left by a slattern in the pan.

"Hello, Old-Timer!" She reached for a cigarette.

"Sorry, kid."

She looked through the flame of the match.

"You couldn't persuade him?"

"No." He looked away from her.

"The notices go up?"

"Yes. . . . The swine!"

"The—what? You've had your salary, I suppose?"

He swung back to her.

"What's roughing you, Marguerite?"

"You! How dare you speak like that of *him*?"

The fire of the spit cat showed in her eyes, but Bickerson wasn't dismayed. He knew—he had met so many of these supposedly temperamental women—he knew that she was hoping her defence of Stradde would get back to the magnate's ears and so propitiate her in his favour.

"Have a spot of something," he said, "and slow down that temper of yours. I've just had an offer to control a group of theatres. Don't say a word to a soul. It may mean a great deal for you, my dear."

He mixed her a drink. She raised the glass half-way to her lips; the expression on her face changed.

"You're a real darling, Bicky," she murmured. "If only everybody understood you as I do."

. . . . .

In the grounds of Lynbrook, the Surrey home of Hamshaw, the guests were wandering about in small groups. They had enjoyed an excellent dinner, excellent wines, excellent cigars, excellent everything. They might have fancied that the host was rather reserved, absent-minded, preoccupied in his thoughts, but they had made no more than a passing comment.

Mrs. Hamshaw was the fascinating little butterfly that kept their attention riveted on her movements.

Pretty little woman! (Horrible compliment to pay any woman.) Pretty is a word that seems always to imply lack of brains. Her flaxen hair blinked painfully in the light of the electrolier—it seemed to know that the merciless whiteness of that light revealed the darker hair nearer the scalp. She talked incessantly about nothing. She pouted like a child of twelve, behaved like a cocotte taking her first lesson from a bawd, patted the wrist of the guest who dared to venture a remark that was not quite in keeping with good manners, and left the impression that if Hamshaw had shown discretion in his business life he had married because natural instinct was too great for his powers of self-control.

Hamshaw came from the house to look for his wife. She was sitting in a summer-house, listening to the vapourings of a young Member of Parliament who had been brought down to Lynbrook by a notable who believed in his future.

"Annabel?"

"Darling?" It was the squeak of a canary answering from the cage its mistress's voice.

"Mr. Stradde is here!"

"No! Really?"

"Go to him at once. You know what I mean?"

Stradde, indifferent to the fact that he was in his office clothes, strolled on the lawn. He didn't appear to glance at the guests in the near vicinity. He made straight for the doll and smiled that grim smile of his when he saw her come quickly from the side of the youngster to whose vapourings she had been listening.

He drew her away from all of them. He talked to her. He had only a few minutes to spare: he was on his way to the Duke of Somebody's place. He flattered her; he wished that he could fling business aside

easily so that he might come down to Lynbrook more often.

And when he had finished talking to her he left her with this burning in her mind.

"A title for Hamshaw! *Lady* Hamshaw! Millions at the command of Hamshaw! Homage for Lady Hamshaw! Rank, position—everything! If only she would pump courage into her husband!

A prominent member of the Cabinet inclined his ear to the whisper of another:

"That's Michael Stradde! He's seldom seen at these affairs."

"Mad—isn't he? Megalomaniac, shall we say?"

"Still buying silver."

"Umph! I'm rather sorry for Hamshaw and the other partner."

The host came past with Stradde by his side. The doll had returned to her young hopeful, who hadn't any money, but did know how to talk sweetly to an empty-headed woman.

Hamshaw introduced his chief to the two important ones. Stradde, taken by a sudden fancy, sat down on the garden seat and chatted amiably about the weather. They drifted, easily, to politics. They talked of the danger that threatened the country unless some drastic measures were introduced to combat the growing tendency to be lethargic. New brains were required at St. Stephen's. Somebody of the Mussolini type. Somebody who would have the courage to challenge the masses.

Stradde listened patiently—very patiently for him. They said to themselves: "He knows nothing of these things. His mind is obsessed by silver."

He stirred; clenched his hands; shook his head as one who says: "Good God! Do you fellows in Parliament realize what is needed to put this country on its feet after the most devastating war in the history of the world?"

"Forgive my bluntness," he said. "I am a plain business man and I hate to waste my time listening to platitudes. When you people in power realize that the whole world is dependent on finance and not on sentiment, or Art, or anything in the nature of dilettantism, then we shall make a stride forward. The fate of the nation—of the civilized world—rests on Finance and the handling of Finance."

They glanced at each other : they were only too ready to listen to a man who was reputed to be the cleverest financier in the country. He talked, not wildly, nor arrogantly, nor with the hateful insistence of the pragmatist. He might have been a mentor who had taken his students into the seclusion of a class-room so that they might concentrate their thoughts on all that he had to say. He spoke of the Church as though it were a profession that had failed and ought to be brought up to date by the layman with brains : he was contemptuous of the Church when it sought to foist its worn-out shibboleths on the people without giving the people credit for being able to think for themselves. He talked of war as though it were the plaything of self-seeking ministers of the Crown. He talked of strikes and their futility when they were opposed to the might of wealth. And he talked of bi-metallism in such a manner that they were almost convinced.

Convinced—and yet they had to remember that in the City shrewd men were laughing to themselves when they heard his name mentioned or read it in the newspapers.

"Money must control the affairs of men !" He said that without any inflection of the voice that might lead them to suppose he was merely uttering a platitude. He believed in his assertions. "Mark what I am saying," he went on. "We have only just emerged from a terrible war that led people to say that nothing greater in the way of calamity could happen. Bah ! Within ten years—less—the world will be wishing that it could have another

war in order to take its thoughts from the misery that afflicts it in peace-time."

"You are a visionary, Mr. Stradde," said one, half-timidly.

"I have vision," said Stradde, coldly, "but not visions. For visions are the prerogative of Parliament." He stared moodily in front of him. Then: "Within a decade, unless you people in Parliament realize your duties towards the people and try to redeem some of your promises—within a decade this world will be in a position of stalemate. With your gold reserves depleted, or in the hands of one or two nations, you will be unable to move forward or backward."

"I have not heard till now that you are a pessimist," said one.

"I am a pessimist when I look about me and see that nobody appears to realize that a nation can maintain its strength only so long as it appreciates the meaning of the word Work."

"You have the dole in mind, Mr. Stradde?"

"That, and other things," he said, bitterly. "The dole should be reduced to about fifteen shillings a week for every man over twenty-one years of age."

They smiled indulgently. He caught the smile and his jowl jutted out.

"And what is more," he said, almost fiercely, "I say that no Government assistance of any kind should be given to a man who has brought more than two children into the world!"

"Ha! Ha!" They couldn't help that guffaw. They believed, now, that he was talking for talking's sake.

"Well?" he exclaimed angrily. "Why should I be called on to keep the children of a man who, in spite of his being unable to provide for them, goes on and on, breeding, enjoying his damnable ecstasy without giving a thought to the chances of the children starving because he hasn't the brains to earn sufficient to keep them?"

There was a silence—the silence that follows a statement that seems to be the result of a mental weakness. Stradde took that silence for inability to answer his argument: he got up abruptly and walked away—walked towards the gates and his waiting car.

One of the Parliamentarians, looking after him, said, with a sigh:

"Crazy! Crazy! And yet he is said to have amassed so much by dint of sheer brain power. Crazy! And so inhuman! Absolutely mad!"

"I wonder!" said the other. "I wonder!"

CHAPTER TEN

IT was late in the evening. In the drawing-room of the Grosvenor Crescent house a strange drama was moving to another phase.

Hector was standing apart from his aunt: she was seated on her accustomed chair—the chair of vigil where she had been sitting for years and years, listening, hoping, waiting—for what? On the footstool at her feet crouched, rather than sat, the girl Felice. The older woman's arm was wrapped around the small shoulders; again and again the head of the older woman was lowered so that she might brush her cheek against that of the girl, in a tender, yearning manner. Hector had been watching them in silence for some minutes. He had returned from the office in Bishopsgate to find them in that position. He had managed to tell his aunt at least a part of what had happened in the office between him and Stradde and the partners. The aunt had awaited his return, holding the girl to her as though she feared to let her go.

Hector had said:

"I have severed my connection with the firm, dear Aunt. I stand alone to-night."

"Wait, wait," she had replied. "Let me think."

She was able to visualize all that occurred between him and his uncle. And she was sufficiently acquainted with the temper of Michael Stradde to understand that it was final. Stradde could never find it in his heart to forgive anyone who flouted his authority, or questioned his aims in life.

Felice—so small, so fragile—looked up at Hector as he was standing there, and the expression on her face brought the semblance of a sob into his throat.

I shall take this child back to the nursing-home: there I will make all arrangements for her safe-keeping. You are going out with revenge in your heart—does it hurt you to think that I can be callous?"

"No," he said gently, and kissed her again. "For I have known for years the suffering that you have endured."

"Money!" she sighed. "Silver! I sometimes think that my soul is encased in silver—hard silver!"

Hector left them within the hour. He had no knowledge of any objective. He didn't very much care where he might stay until he had formulated his plans for the future. His one desire was to get away from the atmosphere of that house. He was not capable of thinking rationally, otherwise he would have been more concerned about Felice. To him, in those moments, she was dead—she had been killed by his uncle—by the man whom he called uncle. She was a memory that must for ever strengthen his resolve never to rest until he had avenged her death. His mind was warped by that which had happened. Any other man—say a Michael Stradde—would have taken it all as a happening in an eventful day. He moved as though he were under the influence of a narcotic. As he went from the house he had in his mind the tragedy, not of Felice, but of his aunt. For years he had suspected the isolation in which she dwelt, but not till now had he realized how completely a man may devastate a human life without actually extinguishing it. For years his aunt had encouraged him to regard her as a maternal protector: he had gone to her in his minor troubles and she had soothed him, even as a mother. He understood all that now. The yearning for motherhood had been frustrated by the insensate greed of silver. The woman who had become a wife was no more than a responsibility that was irksome on occasion. There had been nothing human in her life save Hector, the nephew.

He was too familiar with the character of Michael

Stradde to think for a moment that the scene in the office would be overlooked. When his uncle said a thing, he meant it. Nothing could turn him from his purpose. Already the nephew whom he had favoured in the past was dead and buried. Hector knew that.

As he walked into the street from the old Georgian house, he ran into the most insignificant employee in the firm of Stradde, Hamshaw and Bleeker. He nodded casually, but Tom Slater was too simple of mind to realize that the young master was half-distraught. Slater was bringing a late cablegram.

"Mr. Hector! Glad to see you back, sir. I've got a cable for Mr. Stradde. Came late—just as I was feeding the old pigeons."

Hector merely stared at the whimsical little figure. Slater stared back and saw something in the eyes of the young master that he couldn't understand. He had seen Mr. Bleeker look like that—one day when he came from the private room of the chief.

Hector walked on—slowly, aimlessly. Slater ran up the steps, delivered his cablegram, then hurried back. The two walked side by side.

"We've missed you, Mr. Hector," said Slater, with all the familiarity of an old servant. "We shall be glad to see you back in the old place."

Hector nodded. The tumult in his brain was dying down. There was something soothing in the near presence of the meanest employee.

"See me back, Slater? Oh, yes. You mean back in the office. I'm not returning to the office, Slater."

"No, sir?" Slater showed no surprise. He was trying to unravel the mystery that had suddenly presented itself. There was something wrong. Hector's face lacked anything like the old vitality. He reminded Slater of a dazed pugilist he had seen helped from the ring at Olympia after being knocked out by a hard blow to the chin. "Can I get you a taxi, sir?"

"No," said Hector. "I prefer to walk."

"Couldn't I take a message for you, Mr. Hector. You don't look well."

"I'm not well, Slater. A long walk will do me good."

"That's right, sir. I like walking." Now Slater was convinced that on him had devolved the responsibility of taking care of the young man. He was very proud of the position that had fallen to him. Mr. Stradde would be appreciative.

He began to talk of minor incidents connected with the office—the sports club that had been formed by the staff, the dismissal of this servant and that one. Suddenly, Hector checked him.

"Where do you live, Slater ?"

"Clapham Common, sir."

"It's a long walk ?"

"We could take a tramcar. That is if you don't mind riding in a tram."

"Why should I mind, Slater ?"

" 'Cause—'cause you're a gentleman, sir."

Hector smiled and looked down at the little figure hurrying along by his side.

"I'm no more than a servant, like yourself, Slater," he said. "In fact, you're probably in a happier position, because I am out of work."

Slater laughed loudly at what he accepted as a jest.

They walked on. Mile after mile of streets. Slater hadn't the faintest idea of what was likely to happen when they reached Clapham. Perhaps by that time the young master would have worked off his mood. He glanced at him furtively from the corner of his eye for that sign of the "night before". He knew that the young bloods of the West End often let themselves go and had to pay the penalty on the following day. Slater had been in the Army—he knew what it was to "walk the sergeant's head off"—a long hard route march so that the sergeant's head might clear after a thundering good binge in the N.C.O.'s mess.

They reached Clapham, and Slater's lodgings.

"This is my little nest, sir."

"Really," said Hector, without interest.

"I suppose you wouldn't care to come in and see my wife. She'd be tickled to death to have you in."

"Why, Slater ?"

" 'Cause—'cause you're a gentleman, sir," said Slater.

Mr. Nathanial Potter, the greengrocer politician, came to the door of his shop, his round fat face expanded in a smile as he prepared to greet his tenant. When he saw Hector he stepped back respectfully.

Slater gave the greengrocer a condescending smile.

"Good evening, Mr. Potter," he said. "Government still in office ?"

Mr. Potter turned away to attend the needs of a customer.

Hector followed Slater up the stairs to the humble sitting-room. He hadn't the faintest idea where he was or what he was about. He was moving mechanically : the thunder in his brain had taken again to rumbling. He looked at the startled Mrs. Slater and fancied he saw Felice standing just behind her. Slater placed a chair in position for him, and whispered to his wife.

"Walked home with me," he said. "The young master ! Just got back from abroad. Walked home with me. Friendly as you and me. And—and I don't think he's well."

He left her to slip downstairs again so that he might impress his friend, Potter.

"Who do you think that is ? That's the nephew of the boss—the great Michael Stradde. Tons of money ! and yet walked home with me—just like you might do. What do you say to that ? Ain't they just as human as you and me ? Come upstairs when you've finished and I'll introduce you. Now he *can* talk politics."

Mr. Potter joined them within the hour. He had changed his shop clothes, his black hair was heavily oiled and brushed firmly down on his head. He bowed

with exaggerated politeness to Mrs. Slater, coughed behind his hand as he faced Hector, and being so full of his own importance failed to note the blankness in the other's eyes.

"It's a privilege to meet you, sir," he said, but managed to convey, at least to Mrs. Slater, that the honour was Hector's. "It isn't often we get the likes of you coming to see us."

Mrs. Slater hastened to explain that Mr. Potter was a politician who hoped that some day the Labour Party would recognize his genius.

"Excellent," said Hector, dully. He was thinking of his uncle in that moment: he could visualize him sitting back in his chair at the office, his partners standing in the background, waiting and watching, twiddling their thumbs.

"Yes, sir," said Mr. Potter, smoothing his wet forehead. "I'm Labour. Always have been—ever since I was a kid and had to hunt along the gutters to pick up a bit of grub. You never done that, sir?"

"No," said Hector, "I don't think I have. What was in the gutters?"

"Gooseberry skins! Ha! That never occurred to you. What?" Mr. Potter hooked his thumbs under his armpits and nodded sagely. "What," he asked—"what would your bloated capitalists say if they were told to go out into the streets and pick up gooseberry skins somebody had chucked away after sucking the berry. Tell me that. The rich don't know how the poor live. And what's more, they don't care a damn. Am I right, Slater?"

"Not in your head," said Tom Slater, facetiously. He wished that his friend, Potter, would remember that he was talking to the nephew of one of the wealthiest men in England.

Mr. Potter looked pityingly at the little man, and then smiled at Hector.

"That's what we politicians have to put up with,

sir," he said. "We give up our life to 'em, working for 'em to make their conditions better, and all we get in return is a piece of impertinence."

"Don't take Tom too seriously," said Mrs. Slater hastily. "He means no harm. Anyway, he voted Labour last time and I'll see that he does it again."

"Thank God for the women of England," said Mr. Potter. "If they hadn't been given the vote what would have happened to this country?" He got up from his chair as though he had been called on to address a political meeting. He shook an admonishing finger at Hector.

"Mark my words, sir," he said, pompously. "Within ten years you and your class will be eating out of the hand of Labour."

Tom Slater grasped him by the arm.

"Be careful," he said. "Mr. Hector is a very good-tempered fellow, but you mustn't take liberties."

"I like it," said Hector, casually. He was staring around the room—at the wax flowers in the glass case, the oleographs on the walls, the cheap vases on the mantel-shelf. He was trying to collect his thoughts—to shut out the roar in his ears. Why was he here? What had brought him from Grosvenor Crescent to the cheap little sitting-room of his uncle's meanest employee? What had happened during the last twelve hours?

"Mark my words," said Mr. Potter again. "Labour is coming into its own. Am I right? Progress moves in cycles. . . ."

"Talk English, Mr. Potter," said Slater desperately.

"Moves in cycles, sir," said Mr. Potter. "And Democracy will have its cycle and show the world what it can do."

"You'll be Prime Minister one of these days," said Mrs. Slater, flinging him a sop. "Now let's talk about something else—something that matters."

"I may be Prime Minister," said Mr. Potter, with

the semblance of dignity. "I may be Chancellor. Who shall say ?"

"Excellent," said Hector. It was a parrot-like remark. He made it without being aware of what he was saying. The roaring in his ears was becoming louder.

"Take this question of the silver standard," said Mr. Potter.

Hector pressed a hand to his forehead and stared at the portly figure. What was this ?

"We shall have to come back to the silver standard," said Mr. Potter. "Oh, we know something about finance, sir. It doesn't follow that because we haven't much money we don't think about these things. We shall have to recognize the silver standard. We debased it, just as the Germans did. What's the result. China and India can't trade with us. They want to pay us in silver for the goods we sell 'em, but we say, 'Yes, but silver is worth only a shilling an ounce.' I say we must make the shilling worth a twentieth part of a pound. Now, your relative——"

"Steady," whispered Tom Slater.

"He's in silver—ain't he ?" said Mr. Potter. "He'll be sorry for it one of these days. You wait till Labour gets a firm grip of the public imagination. That day isn't far distant."

"Topping," said Tom Slater, hoping to turn the whole of the conversation into a safer channel. "And you'll be no end of a big bug in Parliament." He turned to Hector and said apologetically : "We have lots of arguments in this little room, sir. Mr. Potter don't mean anything rude, but he likes to talk."

"I hope," said Hector, wearily, "that one day he will become a great leader of thought."

"Rather," said Mrs. Slater aloud. "Tosh," said Mrs. Slater beneath her breath.

"You never can tell what may happen in these days," said Tom Slater. "He might be Prime Minister, and then again, he might never do more than sell cabbages."

Mr. Potter smiled indulgently.

"These two good people," he said to Hector, "are never so happy as when they're trying to take a rise out of me. It would be funny—wouldn't it ?—if the time came when they would be proud to say they had known me personally."

"Who knows ?" said Hector. "The world is turning upside down. Anything may occur in a night."

Mr. Potter bowed acknowledgment of the sentiment.

"You will see a revolution of thought within the next few years, sir," he said. "Mark my words."

"You've always got revolution in your mind," said Slater. "What I say is——"

"What you say," said Mr. Potter, "is not of any great importance. "He turned again to Hector. "So ! You are connected with the firm of Stradde, Hamshaw and Bleeker ?" He shook his head sententiously. "Being in the swim, as you might say, you ought to know that great upheavals may be expected before long."

"I'm not interested," said Hector, wearily.

"Take silver——"

"I hate the word silver, Mr. Potter."

"Yes," said Mr. Potter, "and before ten years have passed over your head you'll hate it more. Until we have the sense to get back to the two standards . . ."

Hector's brain had taken another plunge.

He was listening, now, to his uncle. Then the figure of Sir Gerald Greaves obtruded itself : there was a pistol in his hand. Stradde was laughing ironically and daring him to use the weapon on himself. Away went the scene, and he was standing in front of Felice. Her big eyes were dull of expression : her lips were slightly apart. She was staring so strangely at him that he wanted to cry out : "Don't you know me, darling ?" The fat, plump figure of Mrs. Slater faded away ; in its place was that of his aunt—his heart-impoverished aunt. The thin face was bloodless ; the eyes were weary.

She was staring past him at some vision that might be reproaching her. . . .

"Sir! Mr. Hector! Wake up, sir! Are you certain you're all right?"

Tom Slater was shaking him by the shoulder. The two of them were alone in the sitting-room.

"What's happened, Slater?" he asked feebly.

"You came over so queer, sir. I've sent the wife out for brandy. Mr. Potter went long ago. You seemed to fall asleep. Are you sure you're all right?"

"Quite." Hector sat up in his chair and shook his head as though to free it from some grasp. "Did I fall asleep?"

"To tell you the truth, Mr. Hector, you gave me a fright. And the wife. Would you like me to phone Mr. Stradde and tell him you're here safe with me?"

"No, don't do anything of the sort. How did I get out here?"

"Why, you walked out with me. Some walk, sir."

"Strange! You've been very good, Slater. Hope I haven't inconvenienced you."

"It's been jolly fine having you here, sir," said Slater, "only I got afraid you was having a bad turn."

"Not really. Must have had a touch of fever out East."

"That's it, sir. Lord! How you talked in your sleep—while you was lying there in the chair."

"What? What? Hope I didn't startle your wife."

"She wasn't in the room, sir. I saw to that. When you're like that you might blurt out office secrets." He said that very seriously, as though the whole of the affairs of the firm were in his grasp and it was his duty to safeguard them.

"What did I say, Slater?"

"You made me laugh at first, sir," said Slater. "You talked so funnily. You said—you swore."

"I'm dreadfully sorry, Slater."

"You thought you were talking to Potter, I fancy. He'd been yarning about silver—that's like him—wish I hadn't asked him to come upstairs. You said: 'Yes, you swine, you shall have all the silver you want. I'll load you down with the dam' stuff so's you can't breathe.'"

"That must have been my silly sense of humour, Slater."

"Feeling better now, ain't you, sir?"

"Much," said Hector.

"Of course, it's been wonderful having you here. Fancy you coming out to my little place and treating me and the wife as though you was no better than us. I shall never forget you for that, Mr. Hector. Shall I phone now?"

"No," said Hector. "Didn't I tell you in the beginning that I had closed my connection with the firm."

"You were joking, sir."

"No, I was speaking the truth." He stirred uneasily in his chair; he clenched his hands, then jumped to his feet. "I feel better," he said. "Yes, I'm very grateful to you for a pleasant hour, Slater. I'll get back to Town."

"I'll come with you, sir. As far as the house."

Hector thrust his hand into his coat pocket. His fingers closed on the envelope that his aunt had given him—the note to Edward Gonzolas. In the presence of Slater he opened the envelope and read that which she had written:

"For my sake—for the sake of old memories—take him to your heart."

He turned to Slater.

"It's been a real adventure—coming out here, Slater," he said. "I'm going to ask a favour of you—yes, of you. Don't say a word in the office about this."

"I understand, sir," said Slater. "You must have had a bit of a night last night—coming home from abroad and meeting your friends. I know—I know. Funny

that you should come to me. The wife and I'll talk about this for years."

"Thank you, Slater. Will you say good-bye to your dear wife for me? Tell her that—that I shall always remember this evening."

"How are you going to get back, sir?"

"Get me a taxi, Slater," said Hector. "And tell the man to drive me to Bishopsgate—to the offices of Mr. Edward Gonzolas: he resides over the offices. I—I have an appointment with him."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THERE had been a large gathering in the salon of La Lune—artists, writers, actors and actresses, film magnates. The hour was late and only Lord Pynton remained with the hostess.

After a fashion, she liked Pynton: his was rather faded dignity, but it was impressive: in her serious moments she thought of him as a tall, slender Victorian who had wilted a little under the blast but was still an example of courtliness to the moderns. When the spirit of banter was on her and she dared a little impertinence, she referred to him as the ghost of Beau Nash. He dressed with scrupulous care, parted his grey hair with affection, even touched the natural pallor of his cheeks with the faintest suspicion of rouge.

They sat together in the drawing-room. He was nervous, apprehensive. All the evening he had wanted to say something of great import, but the opportunity hadn't presented itself. She lay back against the cushions of the divan and smiled encouragingly. Probably, he thought, Cleopatra never looked at Antony so provokingly. La Lune might have passed her thirtieth year, but she would never be old. Intelligence and personality make light of the years. From the whole of her slim, graceful body there arose a fragrance that made appeal to all that was human in him. The long, thin fingers were as emotional as her lips and eyes; the lines of her glorious figure showed tantalizingly through the semi-diaphanous gown.

"They were a merry, care-free crowd to-night." She laughed at some recollection. "I didn't want to dance, but I couldn't resist the temptation."

"And you have tired yourself out?" He dared to

reach out and rest a hand on her forearm in solicitude.

"I am never tired," she said. "I love meeting these young people—they keep me young."

"They make me feel old," said he and sighed.

"You should share their light-heartedness," she said.

"I've got past all that," he replied.

"Preposterous!" She looked at him with mock reproach. "One should never grow old. Keep Oscar Wilde's recipe in mind: 'To regain one's youth one has only to repeat one's follies.'"

"What is folly?"

She patted his thin, boney hand.

"Paying too much attention to the passing of the years instead of rightly appraising the spirit of youth that may still be yours."

"You make me feel young," he said. "I always feel better for having been in your company. Where do you get it from? How do you cultivate that magical personality?"

"Flatterer! By choosing the right companions."

"You send strange thoughts through my mind, Mauvine."

"'Mauvine!' You are becoming bold, Lord Pynton. I am just 'La Lune' to most of my acquaintances."

"Am I just one of them, dear woman?"

"Lord Pynton! Are you making love to me?"

"How can one help oneself?"

"Are you—are you going to ask me to marry you?"

"My dear!" The painted face flushed beneath its rouge; the lips trembled; he took away his hand from her forearm like one who regrets an impulse.

She was not resentful. Indeed, she came to his aid in his dilemma.

"Or were you thinking of asking me to become your *mistress*? There! That's sufficiently bold, surely!"

He was grateful for the lead.

"You treat life so lightly, Mauvine. Believe me, I would do anything for you—anything."

"Present me to your friends? Your aristocratic friends? Would you, really? How courageous of you, Lord Pynton! I admire a brave man. How would you begin? Let's run it over: 'My dear Lady Austere, allow me to present to you my very charming mistress, known to the public as "La Lune", once a film actress whose face or notoriety has spread all over the world; now a very mysterious, provocative lady of leisure.' You would have to tell the truth, you know, lest your friends told the lies."

"Mauvine, I am a wealthy man."

"Yes, my dear fellow, but what can your wealth purchase? Happiness for a mistress? Quick! Tell me?"

"I have not mentioned the word 'mistress'. It is repugnant to me."

"No, but it was in your mind." She wagged an admonishing finger. "You are a delightful example of Victorian morality, Lord Pynton. You would sin by stealth and blush to find it shame. Don't protest. I know men so well. They used to give me pain, until I learned to appraise them at their true worth. You would love to hide me away in some dark corner and steal to me only when the desire of the flesh moved you. Tut, tut! Don't argue. Men are like that and we women have to bring ourselves to realize it. No, no, Lord Pynton, let us be good friends, but remember that I do not dwell in the market place. That is, not yet!"

"I swear that there is nothing I wouldn't do for you—give to you."

"Perhaps some day I may test the sincerity of that," she said.

A footman entered and tendered the card of Michael Stradde! She wasn't in the least perturbed.

"Show him in," she said to the servant. And to Pynton: "Mr. Michael Stradde is here. You have never met—have you?"

Lord Pynton moved uneasily in his place.

"Now, now!" She patted his hand playfully. "You are annoyed?"

"I confess it. There was so much that I wished to say to you to-night."

"There will be many more nights."

Moved by an irresistible impulse he lowered his head and kissed her hand. He was in that attitude when Michael Stradde walked into the room!

Pynton flung up his head instantly and behaved like a schoolboy caught in the act of stealing an apple. He got to his feet, blinked as though the light dazzled him, then drew himself up to his full height and arrogantly challenged.

They were introduced to each other. They bowed to each other. Their arms dropped to their sides and they waited, like gladiators, for the first move. La Lune glanced at the tiny watch on her wrist.

"I had no idea it was so late," she said, and smiled sweetly at Lord Pynton.

He accepted the dismissal. He went away hating Michael Stradde. But he was madly in love with the woman who appeared to have the pair of them in the hollow of her hand.

Stradde sat down and waited for her to speak.

"Give me the news," she said, "and don't frown like an ogre."

"It dropped two points again to-day," he said. "Those damned partners of mine are getting their tails between their legs."

"What do you think of Lord Pynton?" Purposely she headed him away from his obsession—silver.

Stradde made a gesture of impatience.

"He didn't impress me," he said. He added, after a moment's reflection: "You appear to think him a fine fellow. Personally, I can't stand the type of man who kisses a woman's hand."

"No, you are not the type that understands those little touches of gallantry."

"He *was* kissing your hand—when I came in, I mean."

"Must I ask your permission to allow another man to kiss my hand ? You never deign to kiss my lips."

He shook himself irritably.

"Don't talk rubbish, Mauvine," he said. "I thought you had risen above those silly weaknesses."

"A woman is always appreciative of a little romance."

"When there's work to be done there's no time for frivolity. . . . Loewenstein sent through another optimistic cable to-day. I'm beginning to distrust him, Mauvine."

"Dear man ! What has come over you ? You are surely not losing heart."

"When you are playing for high stakes, Mauvine, you get into the habit of distrusting everybody."

"Even me ?" she sighed.

"You are different from all others," he said, sincerely, and grasped her hand. "I'm worried to-night, Mauvine."

"Tell me and let me reassure you."

"It's becoming more difficult to keep Hamshaw and Bleeker to heel."

"They are so small, dear one."

"They hang around my neck like barnacles."

"You were going to see Mrs. Hamshaw—did you go down ?"

"Empty-headed little doll ! She wants a title."

"That ought to be helpful to you."

"I'm relying on that to a great extent. . . . Hector's out of the office." He said it with a sigh.

"So you told me," she said. "I know that you were very fond of him."

"So far as I am concerned he is dead. Do you understand that, Mauvine ?"

"I think I know you, Michael."

"He has left me. And with whom do you think he has joined forces ?"

Her reply startled him.

"Edward Gonzolas," she said.

"How do you know ?" he almost shouted. Never had she known him to be so agitated.

"I cannot say," she replied and there was a hint of awe in her voice. "The moment you mentioned that he had left you, the name of Gonzolas came to mind. Do you remember our talking about that man ?"

"You were impressed by him," said Stradde. "I recall it now. I don't know why it should be so, but that name makes me almost superstitious. He seems fated to come into my life."

"And yet you have never met him ?" said Mauvine.

"I looked him up in the firm's books," said Stradde. "Many years ago there was business done between his firm and ours."

"Important business ?"

"Silver transaction," said Stradde laconically and lapsed into silence.

In a little while she prompted him to tell her more of what had happened between him and Hector. He told her that his nephew had not only left the firm, but had taken up a junior partnership in the firm of Gonzolas. He laughed mockingly as he told of Hector's threat to bring him down from his pedestal. It was the yapping of a terrier at the heels of a bull. What could Hector do ? What could Gonzolas help him to do ? Who was Gonzolas ? What was his financial position ? What was the secret that lay behind that walled-in garden in the City ?

"Make it your business to find out all you can, Mauvine," he said.

"Even if I have to invite Hector to meet me ? Is that in your mind ?"

"Leave him out of it," said Stradde, and frowned.

He got up from the divan and paced the floor as though he were in his office. She watched him intently for a moment. Figuratively, her finger was on his pulse. She was rather alarmed by the change that had taken place in his appearance since last she saw him. The

strained expression in the eyes was eloquent of anxiety, if not of wavering. Bleeker and Hamshaw had been worrying him: she could guess that much. She fancied that his lips sagged a little and that he was continually glancing from the corner of his eyes as though he feared assault.

She whispered the question—and there was deep solicitude in her voice:

"Is everything all right at Grosvenor Crescent?"

"Everything," he answered quickly. "Why not?"

"I merely asked the question." She went close to him. "I wonder why I allow myself to be so concerned about you?" she said. "There are occasions when you are almost inhuman towards me."

"Ridiculous!"

"I mean it, Michael. You treat me as though I were merely a slave designed for your commanding. 'Do this,' you say, and 'do that,' and 'ask no questions and expect no reward'."

"Whatever are you talking about, Mauvine?"

"Oh, nothing," she replied a little wearily. "Perhaps I was only contrasting your abruptness with the kindliness of Lord Pynton."

His eyes brightened immediately.

"Pynton? Oh, yes, Pynton! You appear to be getting very fond of that fellow, Mauvine?"

"I believe he admires me, Michael."

"Damn' good judge. But you're above that sort of thing. Your brain wouldn't allow you to behave like a love-sick girl."

"Love means a great deal to a woman, Michael." She spoke softly, yet significantly.

"I have always regarded you as a woman who ought to have been a man."

She smiled rather bitterly.

"Would you have taken me into partnership?" she asked.

"You are in partnership with me now," he said.

"You are the only person in the world who is privy to my thoughts." He looked at his watch. "It's getting on," he said. "Nearly one o'clock, and I have a dozen things to attend to when I get back."

"To Grosvenor Crescent, Michael ?"

"Where else ?" he asked, querulously.

"Do you never sleep ?"

"Can't afford to do that," he said. "Four hours is quite sufficient for any healthy man. . . . I want to telephone Paris and Berlin before seven."

"Restless ! Restless !" She slipped an arm under his. "Why did you look so strangely at me when I mentioned Lord Pynton ?" she asked.

He laughed unpleasantly.

"So, you do want to make me jealous ? Is that it ?"

She moved her arm so that her fingers might grasp his.

"I think I might be happier if I could make you jealous," she said. "It is not very gratifying to a woman to feel that she is regarded as a—well, as I said just now—a slave."

He aroused himself from the sullen mood that had come over him suddenly.

"You ought to be in bed, my dear," he said, abruptly. "You won't keep those looks much longer if you don't rest."

Whereupon she was made conscious of a desire that could not be repelled.

"Did I thank you for that wonderful little clock you sent for my dressing-table ?" she asked.

"I always try to think of you when business will allow of it," he said. "Glad you liked the thing. I saw it in Bond Street and guessed it would please you."

"You please me most when you do those little things without being prompted." She sighed heavily. "Yes, I'm tired, Big Chief. I would I were a child so that I might be carried to bed. . . . Did I tell you that they

have finished the alterations to the bathrooms? You have just sufficient time to see it before I send you away."

"Another time, Mauvine," he said. "It's too late now."

"Lord Pynton thought it was absolutely divine. He said that Du Barry couldn't have dreamed of anything so luxurious."

He went up the stairs with her. The house was quiet: only one servant, a sleepy footman, was on duty in the hall. Stradde followed her up the broad, shallow stairway and along the corridors to where she had her suite. She might have been a young wife showing her husband over their new home: her enthusiasm was unfeigned. The bathroom was as magnificent as money could make it. The walls were lined with Norwegian marble; the floor was of Sicilian marble paving. All the fittings were of silver. And he who had provided it all merely looked and nodded—nodded as though he were a plumber who had been called in to inspect a leaking tap!

Still unmoved, he followed her into her bedroom—the Tudor bedroom on which he had instructed the designers and furnishers to lavish all their art. The walls were panelled in oak from floor to ceiling, relieved by carved oak pilasters. A carved oak cornice and freize encircled the room. The floor was laid with composition in representation of flag paving. A mullioned and leaded light window, forming a bay, occupied the whole of one side of the room.

The hint of desire was lingering in her voice as she said:

"Forget your silver for a while, dear man, and tell me what you think of this?"

"It is no more than fitting to your needs," he said unemotionally.

"I dream in here."

"I was never a dreamer," he said. He turned to look at her dressing-table and mechanically picked up the

tiny timepiece he had purchased in Bond Street. It had cost him two hundred and fifty guineas ; she would have been equally pleased with one that cost as much in shillings, since the very fact that he had bought it was proof that she was in his mind.

A framed photograph of himself was on the table. He indicated it with a smile on his lips :

"That must have been taken a long while ago, Mauvine," he said. "By the lord, I'm getting old."

"I never think of you as getting old," she said softly. "I love that photograph, Michael." She reached out her hand and turned the frame so that the photograph faced her bed. "I look at it first thing in the morning and the last thing at night. Does that mean anything to you ?"

"It's good to feel that there's someone who takes an interest in me."

"Only an interest ?"—disappointedly. She was standing slightly behind him so that he didn't see the movement with which she disturbed the silk that concealed her bosom. "Michael, I would rather go out of this house without my shoes than leave this at home."

He turned. She showed him the gold locket suspended by the thinnest of gold chains from her neck and nestling between the roseate mounds. "Your miniature," she said in a whisper. "You lie so close to my heart. Are you pleased ?"

"I have always shown you that of all women I prefer you," he said.

The delicate perfume that floated up from her throat and bosom would have made an abject slave of Lord Pynton : Michael Stradde's mind was in Paris and Berlin ; he was discussing with Loewenstein that last cablegram.

"Good night, Mauvine."

"Good night," she said heavily.

"I can let myself out if your man isn't there."

"Very well, Michael."

He walked to the door, hesitated, looked back and saw that she was staring disconsolately at the dressing-

table. By what he was moved he couldn't have said, but contrary to his nature he felt a wave of pity rush over him. He went quickly back to her side, pressed his hands to her cheeks and drawing her head towards his, kissed her twice.

He went quickly from the room, leaving her quivering with unsatisfied passion. She waited till she heard his car being driven away : then she sat down at her dressing-table and looked long and thoughtfully at her reflection in the mirror.

She loved him ! She tolerated his brusqueness when she was yearning for something human in him. She admired him : he was a giant in that City which he had taught her to regard as his kingdom.

There came a timid knock at the door. Her maid entered.

"Poor Marie," said Mauvine. "It's dreadfully late. I am so thoughtless."

"Madam is beautiful," said Marie. "Madam is the kindest woman in all the world."

The maid began to undress her.

CHAPTER TWELVE

STILL plunging with a gambler's recklessness when he knows that he must either win or take the knock! Stradde was still buying, still piling it up! That damnable silver! His agents in Berlin, Amsterdam and Paris were working feverishly at this command with Loewenstein, as personal representative, controlling the business. Loewenstein was a German Jew who hated everything English, but played the sychophant to Stradde so that he might avenge himself for any real and imaginary wrong. He knew that Stradde trusted him; his aim was to justify that trust until the moment came to strike! Loewenstein seldom came to England, and then he saw only Stradde in the privacy of his study in Grosvenor Crescent. He slipped away like a wraith at the approach of dawn.

The weeks and the months were passing. Stradde's mania was becoming more acute, but only one person appeared to realize it—that person was his wife, the patient, disillusioned woman who had kept vigil for thirty years and more—a slave to whom not even a scrap of comfort was thrown by the task-master.

The newspapers began to take an interest in the silver holdings of Stradde. It was impossible to keep everything secret. Newspaper men are more shrewd and inquisitive than Scotland Yard detectives; they start with this advantage—they have intelligence above the ordinary and refuse to be guided by rule of thumb methods. They have to earn their livelihood, and they recognize no authority when they are working on a job. Stradde believed in newspaper men and their ability; also, he hated them. Once he was heard to declare during the Four Years' War that if they would give him twelve

Fleet Street reporters and sit them around a table with him he would end the War within a month! Stradde liked to sneer at authority—such as Whitehall!

The newspapers began their "stunt" about Stradde with significant little paragraphs. "What is the object of a certain City man in buying so much silver? Does he really believe that it will be stabilized? Isn't he taking great risks?" Then they followed with hints at the amazing silver holdings of a City man and the anxiety of his partners.

Stradde was aware of these hints and innuendoes. He retaliated by using the columns of those financial papers he controlled in order to restore confidence. The general public wasn't aware that he had any interest in those papers and it swallowed the stories that were printed. At a time when silver was tumbling down like a house of cards, and men in the City were arching their eyebrows and muttering the name of Stradde, he financed an Antarctic Expedition, bought a string of racehorses, and made a public offer of half a million for a West End hotel! It was all eye-wash, but it was effective. He knew his market. Certainly, he contributed a sum of money to the expedition, but the racehorses were disposed of before they had been in his possession a week.

Silver still falling!

Hamshaw bearded him in his private room.

"There's somebody flinging it on the market as fast as you take it up. Can Loewenstein enlighten us?"

"Do you seriously think that there is anyone foolish enough to fight me, Hamshaw?"

"The newspapers are talking pretty loudly."

"Perhaps I've paid them to do it, Hamshaw. I know my work."

And yet, when he was alone, he asked himself the question: "Who can it be that dares to match his wits against mine?"

. . . . .

In the office of Edward Gonzolas there was a beautiful atmosphere of calm. There were only a few clerks and they had grown old in the service of the master to whom they were devoted. There was nothing of the frenzy that often marked the conditions in that gigantic building wherein Stradde, Hamshaw and Bleeker had their business centred. The offices of Gonzolas were as stolid and peaceful as the oak that panelled the walls; no one moved out of a measured tread; the pages of the ledgers turned as of their own volition; the machine moved slowly and seemingly leisurely, yet the impression conveyed was that it could never get out of order. The Gonzolas office was one of those places that brisk City men mention as an afterthought and wonder how it survives the turmoil of modern business. Yet it went on. And when other firms were shaking to their fall, it was still able to carry on as though nothing could divert the steady stream of prosperity. The clerks were old, but they were better paid than the clerks in any other firm. Shocks came to disturb the City, but it was safe to bet that Gonzolas was not drawn into the smash. City men who lived on dreams of making financial history, stumbled over their schemes and went to prison for long terms, but it was accepted as a certainty that Gonzolas had never had any dealings with the firm that had taken the blow.

Edward Gonzolas controlled the slow-moving machine and of an evening walked in his walled-in garden and picked simple flowers of remembrance.

On the morning of the day that Hector came to him with that letter of introduction, Gonzolas received him with the dignity and charm of the Spanish grandee, than whom there is no greater aristocrat. He read the simple note that had been written by the woman in the lonely house and a sigh escaped him as he placed it carefully away in a drawer of his desk. In the little room where the shadows played and the sound of street traffic came but faintly, Edward Gonzolas questioned the young man

about his ambitions and spoke to him encouragingly and as though any success he might achieve would redound to the credit of that age-old business firm.

And, studying the old man's face, Hector wondered why he had always been disposed to divorce romance from business. Gonzolas was old, yet his smile was that of a youth who still hopes to trail the rainbow's end. The long, thin nose was delicately fashioned; there was ineffable charm about the set of the mouth and the languid droop of the eyelashes. He walked with a slight stoop, but there seemed to be amazing strength in the shoulders. It was when he talked of business and its many ramifications that he conveyed the impression that nothing in history had eluded him. The world, to him, was a printed page that was ever before his gaze: he had his fingers on the pulse of every market in the world; he talked of silver and nitrates and Chile and India. He was acquainted with the climatic conditions of every part of the globe; he had some friend or agent in every city of note. He was wealthy, very wealthy, yet he was without arrogance. Tactfully, he induced Hector to talk about his uncle and the schemes by which he was moved. He nodded as the replies were given, yet offered no criticism. It was when Hector allowed his passion to overcome his discretion and declared that he would never rest until he had humbled Michael Stradde that Edward Gonzolas seemed to awaken from the sleep into which he had fallen. His eyes flashed for a second; he raised his right hand as in warning, and let it drop without saying a word. He changed the topic of conversation:

"How is your dear aunt?"

"Still lonely," said Hector without knowing why he should have made so provocative a reply.

"Ah!" said Gonzolas and sighed heavily. "Loneliness is very hard to bear." He looked through the window to the garden where the old mulberry tree reared itself into the leaden-coloured atmosphere of the city. "I don't

think I shall know the meaning of loneliness now that you are with me," he said.

They worked together—these two. The youthfulness of Hector was an inspiration to the old man; and the steadying influence of Gonzolas was of incalculable value to Hector. Then came the day when without preamble Gonzolas said:

"I want you to go to Chile for me, Hector. How long will it take you to prepare for the journey?"

"I could get away to-night if necessary," said Hector.

"Leave London by to-morrow evening," said the old man. "By that time I shall have prepared all my papers. It is a very important errand. If I were a younger man, I would make the journey myself. It concerns silver!"

Hector said very quietly:

"I didn't think you were interested in it, sir."

And Edward Gonzolas, smiling faintly and in that tired way that suggests profound knowledge, said:

"I am in a position to control more silver than your uncle, Michael Stradde, has ever dreamed of."

Hector leaped into new life immediately.

"You could crush him?" he asked in a whisper.

"Why should I do anything of the sort?" asked the old man.

"You have no love for him?"

"Between love and business there is a wide gulf, young man. Why mention the word?"

"In the sense that you—that you don't care for him. Put it that way."

"I have known Michael Stradde for many, many years," said Edward Gonzolas, and his voice fell to a mere whisper.

"You do not admire him as a business man?"

"I think of him only as a young man. Our feud began over thirty or forty years ago. Say no more about it. Make your arrangements to leave for Chile."

"I am ready," said Hector grimly. He knew that he

was on the threshold of a campaign that was likely to change the trend of his life.

Gonzolas walked in the garden although it was not yet dusk. The boom of City traffic still came across the roofs and along the sinister backwaters that are known as alleys. He stood for a while beneath the old mulberry tree and watched the soot-grimed pigeons circling and alighting. He walked the garden with his hands clasped behind his back, his head bowed, his lips moving slightly to his thoughts. Silver ? Yes, he could control so much silver that Michael Stradde must capitulate just when he wished him to capitulate. He could humble him to the dust. He had but to move his forces this way and that and, wealthy man though he was, Stradde would be compelled to acknowledge defeat. Revenge ? For what ? For a life of loneliness. Stradde had robbed him of the only woman who had ever found a way into his heart. Stradde had taken from him that which would have made him rich, indeed, and yet he had done no more with the prize than to subject it to bitter, "refined" cruelty. Youth was gone. Fate might have said : "Revenge is not for you." Then Hector had come into his life. Hector, beloved of the woman for whom Gonzolas would willingly have died. Through Hector the revenge would be complete.

Revenge ! It would be possible to shake the City to its very foundations, since the fall of a man like Stradde would stagger even his direst enemy. Stradde was known to be wealthy—so wealthy that he talked in millions when other men were concerning themselves with thousands. Stradde's financial schemes, at one time and another, had embraced the whole world of business. The cleverest, shrewdest men in both hemispheres had followed his lead. He could do nothing wrong. His was the touch of Midas. The silver fever that had assailed him piqued the curiosity of the crowd—they doubted that he was acting as wisely as in the past, but they fancied that he would pull through if his ambitions

were realized—if silver rose even ten points he would amass a fortune that couldn't be calculated.

But if he failed! If he fell!

A company that had weathered the storms of a hundred years and had built up a reputation in every part of the world, would fall with him. The firm of Stradde, Hamshaw and Bleeker was one of the very foundation stones of the City of London.

Gonzolas went back into his office. From a secret drawer he took a sheaf of papers and in a little while, after much pondering, he called Hector to him.

Quietly, impressively, he said to the young man:

"Here, in brief, is the story of the Gonzolas and the Straddes. Commit it to memory."

Silver trailed right through the story that he told. Coincidence, he said in the beginning, was something that must not be taken into account. Fate cast its dramas just as a theatrical manager, or play producer, cast his play. The group of actors worked right through the piece. The name of Gonzolas had been linked with silver for a hundred years and longer. Out in Chile there were silver mines that belonged to a Gonzolas. And in the past—the dim past—there had been a Stradde, father, grandfather, or great-grandfather of Michael Stradde—who had wormed his way into the affairs of the Gonzolas. Somewhere in the Andes—that chain of mountains that rises like a bulwark between the land and the Pacific—there was a silver mine that hadn't been even touched! There was enough silver hidden there to swamp any man or combination of men who tried to control the market. It was amazing to him, Edward Gonzolas, that any sane man should dream of sinking whole nations by gathering together what he conceived to be the silver of the world and dictating his own terms. The law protected the people against those who sought to corner wheat and foodstuffs. He lowered his voice reverently as he suggested that Heaven itself would

defend those same people against the man who tried to strangle them with bonds of silver.

In Chile, Hector would meet Don Jose Gonzolas, an old man whose heart would never be healed of the wound inflicted by a Stradde in the long ago. In the Andes—bleak and barren and towering to the skies, a woman lay in a shallow grave. She was the woman Don Jose had loved and lost through the machinations of a Stradde—a Stradde who thought only of what silver might mean to him.

"These feuds go on through the ages," said Gonzolas. They were seated in the quiet, sombre room; outside, gnarled and twisted yet seemingly full of life, the old mulberry tree reared its head into the murk of the city life. Again and again the old man turned his gaze towards it.

To Hector he appeared to be exceedingly old in those minutes. The yearning in the big, full eyes was eloquent of a life of disappointment.

"I have come to regard you as a son of mine," he said. "That may sound strange to your ears, but wait until I have opened my heart a little more. You have been with me long enough to convince me that you have brains and may one day reach the very top of the tree. I wonder if you will be strong enough to keep your throne, if ever you should get to it? I love your aunt. Does that startle you, Hector?"

"No," said Hector, in a deep, vibrant tone. "I gathered that from her."

"She sent you to me!" said Gonzolas eagerly.

"Sir, there is no need to distress yourself by telling me all that is in your mind. My aunt and I have loved each other ever since I was a child. It was not till I became a man that I realized how lonely a life she has led."

"I understand," said the old man. "I, too, have been lonely. Money cannot rid you of loneliness. Try to assimilate that truth. If anything, it can make you more

lonely than the poorest beggar in the street. Will it surprise you to learn that I am probably one of the wealthiest men in England ?"

"The City thinks of you as a——"

"As a poor, old-fashioned trader !" Gonzolas laughed gently. "Well, it is a reputation that has its advantages. Long ago I realized the futility of money—of great possessions. There is only one possession that may bring you lasting happiness, Hector, and that is the love of a woman who has blended her life with yours. That may be an old-fashioned idea, but just so long as the world exists love will be paramount in the affairs of man. I wish that I could rid myself of this desire for revenge. It is a mean and despicable phase of human nature, but it is terribly difficult to eradicate. I don't know that I want to see Michael Stradde humbled, but I cannot forgive him for devastating the life of a woman before whom I shall ever kneel in homage. Does my sentimentality irk you ?"

"I love you for it, sir," said Hector.

"Thank you," said Gonzolas. He looked again into the garden. His lips twitched pathetically ; a smile came into his eyes. "Just an old bachelor," he mused.

In a little while, he recovered his composure and became again the business man who works in secret, keeps his finger on the pulse of the market, and keeps a still tongue in his head. He took Hector into his confidence, for he was satisfied that the rift between uncle and nephew was permanent.

"I stand, seemingly, on the edge of the crowd," he said, "but I fancy that I see more than most people in this city. They are talking to-day about the operations of Michael Stradde. There are those who believe that he cannot make a mistake. I say to myself that his brain is tottering. If he could realize his ambition and get silver back to its real worth he would be the richest man in England. It is a terrible responsibility and I am not satisfied that he is sufficiently strong to control so

much wealth. Although I do no business with his firm, Hector, I am acquainted with his movements—that is part of my business; to know what the other man is doing. Have you ever heard of an agent of his named Loewenstein?"

"Loewenstein is his most trusted agent," said Hector.

"Loewenstein," said Gonzolas, "is his most dangerous enemy."

"Loewenstein controls all the other agents," said Hector, "and advises Mr. Stradde."

"I am aware of that," said Gonzolas, "but what Mr. Stradde appears to forget is the injustices that have been done Loewenstein in the past. He is a Jew, clever as all Jews are clever, and he has a memory that will not allow him to forget all that he and his have suffered in the past. Now let's talk about your voyage to Chile. You will take with you my letters of introduction to my relatives. I shall rely on your sagacity. Understand that. When you return it will be as my partner in this business."

"Mr. Gonzolas!"

"And the day will come when you will be controlling more money than Michael Stradde dreams of. Pray, God, that you will be strong enough to keep your balance."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

HECTOR called at the house in Grosvenor Crescent before catching his train to Southampton. His aunt received him in the silent, sombre drawing-room. A long while had passed since last he saw her, and the change in her was so marked that he caught at his breath, held her at arm's length and studied her face.

"You have become young again, dear aunt," he said.

"I *am* young, Hector," she said.

"Life has brought something new to you ?"

"It has brought Felice," she said. "Your Felice."

"She is here, aunt ?"

"She has been with me for many, many weeks now. I wouldn't have believed that there was so much happiness in life."

"But—my uncle ? What is his attitude ?"

"He isn't aware that she resides in this very house," said Mrs. Stradde. "Perhaps there is no place that is so strange to him as his own house."

"He doesn't suspect ?"

"He is so seldom here, Hector. And the house is so large. . . . Will you see the darling before you go on this journey ?"

"She will consent to see me, aunt ? Is she——"

"Yes, she is better. The mind has been steadied. The brain has regained its balance—in a way. She is my child now, Hector. She is giving me all that I longed for when I was younger. She is a daughter in whom I am trying to live again."

Felice came to him in the drawing-room. A frail, beautiful girl in whose eyes dwelt the sad expression of tragedy. He thought of her, in that second, as a rose

from which the sun had taken its warmth. He spoke to her gently, fearfully :

"Felice ! It is Hector. You know me ? You remember me ?"

The watching aunt took the girl by the hand and led her up to him.

"Of course I know you, Hector," said the girl, "but it seems so long ago since last we talked together. Where have you been ?"

"Working, my darling. Working in the City. Working for you."

The big eyes showed no sign of life. She nodded slowly and said :

"I have been praying for you, Hector." She looked at the aunt as to say : "Is it not true ?"

"You are getting well, Felice," he said tenderly. "Soon you will be able to go away for a long holiday—a rest, a change."

"I am happy here," she said. "Where are you going ?"

"To South America," he told her.

"You will be away a long while ?"

"No, not long. I shall return to you."

"And I shall wait for you," she said, simply.

. . . . .

Hamshaw went into the private room of the chief, closing the door after him and turning again as though he would lock it against interruption. He flung a late afternoon edition of a paper on the desk.

"Revolution is breaking out in China," he said laconically.

"Well ?" Stradde looked up from his papers. "What's that got to do with me ?"

"The old story," said Hamshaw. "Silver is down to rock bottom and the masses are on the verge of starvation. Of course, they can't trade with us at the price."

"Hamshaw"—the cold, steel-blue eyes glittered

wickedly—"there are, or must be, four hundred million Chinese. Would it hurt the world of progress if a few of them starved to death? Don't be a sentimental ass. I've bought heavily to-day on two reports, one from New York and one from Loewenstein."

"There's a reference to you and your operations," said Hamshaw. He turned over the pages of the newspaper he had flung on the desk. "They are beginning to ask questions."

"Who?"

"Fleet Street."

"To hell with Fleet Street!"

"That's all very well, chief, but if you are so certain that you are winning will you try to explain to me why so much silver is being thrown on the market? The more you buy the more there is flung on the open market. Good God! The world seems to be crammed with silver."

Stradde threw down his fountain pen and sat back in his chair.

"Keep your head, *Sir* Ernest Hamshaw," he said.

Hamshaw's lips pouted, he leaned forward and opened his eyes wide.

"What's that, chief?"

"Stand on me," said Stradde, enigmatically. "I promised your wife that I would do it, and it's as good as done." He laughed. "It ought to help the credit of the firm, old man," he said. "There's always that to consider. And, come to think of it, I don't know of anyone more entitled to the honour."

"By Jove!" said Hamshaw, and stepped back from the desk. His face was pallid with excitement. "It—it would be a wonderful thing for Annabel!"

"Exactly," said Stradde. "Now go away and leave me to my work. Keep Bleeker quiet. That fellow gets on my nerves."

"Of course I will," said Hamshaw and walked to the

door. He was muttering to himself. "*Sir* Ernest! *Sir* Ernest!"

Stradde picked up the afternoon paper. He scanned it hurriedly. His brows contracted. In the Society Gossip there was a small paragraph that would have escaped the notice of nine or ten readers. Simply this:

"Lord Pynton, accompanied by the lady known to millions as 'La Lune,' attended the opening of an exhibition at Croydon yesterday afternoon. To an inquirer, his lordship indignantly denied the rumour current that an engagement is imminent. The lady, he said, was no more than a very old and an esteemed friend."

Stradde crumpled the paper into a ball and flung it on the floor.

What the hell was hidden in that paragraph? Could he trust her? Dare he distrust her? She was the only friend he had in the world! He didn't dare distrust her. Damn Pynton! Would it be very difficult to *sink* him!

There was another paragraph that caught his eye, but didn't arouse any great interest. It stated that Nathanial Potter, an ex-greengrocer, of Clapham, had successfully contested a by-election. It added that in spite of his humble beginnings the Party held Potter in high esteem. His attitude towards the silver standard problem had intrigued the leader of the Party. There were those who averred that within a few years Nathanial Potter would be an important figure in politics. It was the word "silver" that caught the eye of Stradde.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE markets of the world were shifting into chaos. The financiers were admittedly nervous; politicians were hinting darkly at crises that could not be long delayed.

In the offices of Stradde, Hamshaw and Bleeker there was severe tension. The partners were openly challenging the mental strength of Michael Stradde; he had passed the time when bullying availed; now he was disposed to appeal to them to have a little more courage and faith in his judgment. His holdings of silver were tremendous; he knew that he couldn't sell even if he wished to do so; he knew also that he didn't dare stop buying lest the gamble as a whole should be shattered and the firm tumbled into ruin.

Day after day the report held the same sickening note of despair. Silver was falling, falling. If by any chance it did go up a point, it dropped two the next day. It seemed to the partners that the more Stradde bought, the more there was flung on the market.

Hector had gone out to Santiago. Although the fortune at which he aimed was still no more than a myth, he was conscious of a presentiment that would not be repressed—there was always the feeling of certainty! Something was going to happen! Something so stupendous that all other affairs concerning his life were held in subjection. Even the tragedy that had broken into the romance between him and Felice lost much of its significance: it became a dull pain to which he was almost inured already. All semblance of sentiment so far as his uncle was concerned had been eradicated from his heart. Michael Stradde, the Silver King, was an enemy to the people and must be overthrown at all costs.

Events moved with dramatic, incredible swiftness. While in the city office of his uncle there was an atmosphere of depressing apprehensiveness, Hector experienced the sensation of stepping from one triumph to another without much apparent effort on his part.

When he met Don Jose Gonzolas and conveyed to him the special message which he had been deputed to deliver, he felt as though the Fates, or whatever may control human destinies, had brushed every obstacle aside and acclaimed him the one instrument for which they had been waiting so that he might set a broken world right and readjust its machinery. The relationship between Don Jose Gonzolas and Edward, the "Old Mulberry Tree" of City jest, was patent to Hector. Here was another fine example of the old Spanish noblemen who seem to move in a world of their own creating—men of high intelligence yet without the slightest trace of arrogance in their mien. He was very old, and the shoulders were bowed and the face almost bloodless, but in the eyes there remained the fire of youth and the magnificent dignity of his line. That which had been written by his relative in London commended Hector to him, but he was obviously impressed by the man himself. They became close and lasting friends. For several months Hector remained with him, absorbing the romance of the country, listening avidly to the stories told by Don Jose. Silver! Always silver! It crept through every reminiscence; it was linked with every milestone in the life of the old man; it went back over the generations. There seemed never to have been a time when silver and a Gonzolas were not linked together.

Then came the night when deeper confidences were exchanged. Reference was made to a Stradde who in the dim past had wronged a Gonzolas. The hatred of the name of Stradde had been passed on; the unforgivable sin still rankled in the Spanish mind. The desire for revenge became more accentuated as the years rolled on.

Michael Stradde was now the one object on which the Gonzolas mind was concentrated. To bring about his humiliation was the aim that must never be lost sight of.

Don Jose studied the face of his man through the haze of cigar smoke.

"The time may come," he said, "when you yourself will be very wealthy. I speak not of riches that excite the envy of the masses, but of possessions that might make you a danger to the whole world if your mental balance should not be kept. Tell me, my young friend, have you ever pondered the age-old problem of what you might buy if you had unlimited wealth ?"

"No," said Hector quite frankly. "I suppose the desire to accumulate still more money is a disease that afflicts most humans."

"You would hoard ?"

"No. I would go on waiting until the great idea came —the idea of how rightly to employ vast sums."

"Accumulating and accumulating like the leaves in autumn—like the sands of the sea and the waters of the valleys." Don Jose smiled at a reflection. "I suppose we must call it ambition," he said, "but only because the problem is too vast, too complex, to allow of an ordinary human being solving it with a flash of thought. I would that I were younger if only to decide for myself what I would most desire to purchase with the wealth I have garnered."

Hector inquired with courteous inflection of the voice :

"You are wealthy ?"

"Wealthier than some of your Eastern potentates," said the old man. "But I am old. Of what use is it to me ?"

And Hector, thinking grimly of Stradde and all that he had suffered at his hands, said :

"There is one use that I could make of it."

He looked away, but Don Jose was studying his

face intently. The long, thin features suddenly flushed with eagerness as a thought flashed through the Spaniard's mind. He knew instinctively that Hector was thinking of his uncle, and all the years of waiting for revenge seemed, for him, to end in that moment. Don Jose was an old man: he knew that he couldn't hope to live much longer; it would seem as though his whole life had been wasted if death came before he could achieve his great object. And what greater irony than this: Humble Stradde bring down to the level of a pauper—do it through the agency of his own nephew whom he had professed to love! It was a stimulating idea. He leaned forward in his rattan chair, rested a bony elbow on his knee and gazed musingly at the cigar between his fingers. Slowly he lifted his gaze to Hector's face and peered through the blue smoke.

"You asked me if I am a wealthy man," he said, "and it may have seemed to you that I talked arrogantly, boastfully, when I made reply. I was dead serious. I can put my hand on so much silver, for instance, that I would be in a position to manipulate the markets just as I desired." Again he paused.

Hector's eyes were glowing with enthusiasm.

"You could strangle those who are buying against a rise? Is that it?" he asked.

The old Spaniard nodded and smiled.

"Yes," he said. "Even if they had ten, twenty, or thirty millions of pounds sterling with which to prosecute their schemes. My boy, listen to me. I am old, as you can see. My knowledge of the world is considerable. And I have at my command the knowledge of my forebears who interested themselves in nothing save silver. In your own country there is little real understanding among the masses so far as the silver market is concerned. Among your politicians, even, there is only a passing interest in it. Why? Because they do not try to understand its importance. And yet the time is near at hand when the silver problem will be exercising the minds

of the whole world. In your country they will depart from the gold standard because of the chaos into which it has landed them. Silver! Keep silver in your mind! It should control so much."

"It is in a sorry plight just now," said Hector.

"It will fall still further," said the old Spaniard. "Very soon your most brilliant financiers will be compelled to take steps to check its fall and so save the silver standard nations from penury. And only by stabilizing silver will they be able to save the gold standard. Before you are much older you will see the effects of the shortage of gold. There are only two thousand millions of gold available for those nations that use it as a standard currency; times are moving, so that three-quarters of that amount may fall into the hands of only two nations. Can you imagine what that may mean to the rest of the world?"

"You mean America and France?" said Hector.

Don Jose nodded.

"The two standards cannot always pull against each other with impunity. The speculator shall not devastate nations without suffering punishment."

Hector knew that he was leading up to some avowal of far-reaching importance. He remained quiet.

"I own a silver mine," said Don Jose, laconically. He paused so that the other might absorb the significance of his remark. "The Gonzolas are part of the very history of Chile. They have owned many mines, but this one—this one remains a sinister weapon in the hands of a member of the family. It shall be used against the enemy.

"The enemy?" said Hector. "You mean Michael Stradde? Go on. There is no affection for him left in my heart. He has cared nothing about those business victims that trail through his history. He could stand by and watch a nation suffering agonies: he would not care so long as he triumphed in this scheme of his to garner all the silver possible."

Don Jose smiled indulgently.

"You must not flatter him by attributing to him more power than he possesses," he said.

"You have no idea of the silver holdings of the firm," said Hector.

"Believe me, little escapes my notice," said Don Jose.

A manservant stole silently to the veranda and handed his master a cablegram.

"Pardon me," murmured the old man to Hector. He read and passed the coded message over to his guest. "It is from my relative with whom you are associated," he said. "He informs me that the firm you mentioned just now took up a few more parcels of silver yesterday." He laughed softly before resuming: "No, no, don't get it into your head that Michael Stradde is a mighty power in this great conflict that is going on all over the world."

"He believes that silver prices will soar to——"

"Ah, yes! He has told his partners and his dupes, maybe, that it will go up to eighty or more. That is nonsense. Stradde is not a fool. He believes that silver will be stabilized, or that England will adopt it. He is satisfied in his own mind that it will go to two shillings and sixpence an ounce. That will be sufficient for his purposes. If he can clear out his holdings at that figure he will be a wealthy man—a dangerously wealthy man. How will he employ the power that thirty millions sterling might give him? Now you see why I asked you that seemingly simple question just now? Some men, possessed of so much wealth, might do something more vital to a people than keep"—the dark eyes gleamed contemptuously—"than keep a mistress," he said.

Hector ignored that last remark. He was thinking of Stradde's dreams.

"He believes that he is a controlling force," he said argumentatively.

"He is nothing of the sort," said Don Jose. "The selling or buying of silver by the Indian and Chinese

governments is important; what Michael Stradde might do is not of any great consequence to anyone but himself. Perhaps some years ago—it might have been."

Hector was disposed to argue still further lest it should be assumed that he knew nothing of his subject.

"When you speak of your silver mine, then," he said, "you are not thinking of what India or China might do."

The big eyes of Don Jose fairly blazed as he replied bitterly:

"The one enemy of the Gonzolas is Michael Stradde. The mine is dedicated to his downfall. There! To you, a relative, I have declared all that is in my heart. The Gonzolas could not circumvent nations, but the family has amassed sufficient to humble Michael Stradde." He laughed unpleasantly. "There must have been times when he wondered who it was that persisted in flinging silver on the market just when he fancied that a rise in price was imminent." He half-turned in his chair and looked towards the Andes in the far distance. "The mine is yonder," he said—"yonder, towards the Pacific. The unknown seller is here—talking to you."

He went on to tell Hector that the mine had been steadily worked without the silver being sold openly; it was held as a weapon—a weapon with which the defeat of Stradde might be brought about.

That night sleep refused to come to Hector. The remarks made by Don Jose kept his brain active. He could understand so much that had affected him only casually in the past. His uncle was gambling, not for a rise of sixty or seventy points, but one of twelve—that would meet all his requirements. He was bolstering up the courage of his partners by talking in fantastic figures, but he would be ready to leap in and sell the instant a rise to two shillings or half a crown was made. His uncle was not a madman—he could have been forgiven many of his sins if his brain was actually unbalanced.

His sanity on many subjects made his offences against society only the more heinous. In the silence of his bedroom, Hector heard again the plaintive voice of his aunt as she replied to the man who had made a wilderness of her life. Poor, sex-starved woman! There had been no romance for her. Real love had been denied her. Stradde had visited refined cruelty on her until that house in Grosvenor Crescent was no better than a prison in which she had to drag out the rest of her blighted life. And that other remark by Don Jose began to torment his brain: "How would you employ great wealth?" Once, his only dream had been to bestow on Felice, his beloved, all that a woman's heart might desire. But Stradde had tried to mangle that ambition too. Soulless, inhuman Stradde!

Then the wind swung off at a tangent. He began to ponder the character of Don Jose Gonzolas. Strange that silver should partially unbalance even so fine a mind as that of his host! For he was convinced that no man could give up his life to revenge without being unbalanced in his mind. But what of himself. He sat up in bed as he asked that question. Wasn't he dreaming of making revenge his only mission in life?

The hum of insect life came plainly through the window screens. The moonlight, striking through the interstices, drew fantastic shapes on the floor and the walls. Once, he started almost affrightedly as what appeared to be a dark face showed in the room; it was gone before he could spring from his couch. Then came the sound of whispering and the soft pad of felt-covered feet on the floor of the corridor without.

Strange murmurings like unto prayers came from the adjoining room in which he knew Don Jose slept. The sounds developed into lamentations until Hector could bear the suspense no longer. He left his room and walked along the corridor. A dark-complexioned man came from Don Jose's room and intercepted him.

"Senhor! I was on the point of calling you. It is too

late. My dear friend and yours, Don Jose Gonzolas, is dead."

The man opened wide the door of the bedroom as he spoke There, kneeling by the bedside of their late master, their faces buried in the sheets, were two figures whom Hector recognized as menservants. A third man, whom he learned later was the doctor, was standing at the foot of the bed looking down on the still form. The long lean face of Don Jose seemed leaner than ever as the half-closed eyes stared up at the ceiling.

"It came swiftly, senhor," said the doctor, "and yet he has known for a long while that it was near. There was no pain save in the mind, for his life's work is still unfinished."

"I understand," said Hector in a whisper and continued to gaze on the silent form.

The man who had spoken to him in the corridor touched him on the shoulder.

"I have been the family lawyer for thirty years," he said. "I have much to say to you that concerns your immediate future."

"My future ?" said Hector, shaking his head in perplexity.

He followed the lawyer from the death chamber to his own room.

"Your future," the lawyer repeated, "and, it may be, the future of thousands with whom you may come in contact. The will of my dear friend was altered by him half an hour before death came to relieve him of his life's task. All that he possessed—and it is more than even his most intimate friends could have imagined—has been left to you !"

"To me !" Hector was trembling with emotion.

"Conditionally," said the lawyer gravely. "You are to take up the life work that lay so close to his heart."

Hector sat down on the edge of the bed and appealed mutely for enlightenment.

"We will go through it to-morrow, or, rather, after my old friend has been given sepulture."

Hector asked the question mechanically; most certainly it wasn't avarice that dictated it and the lawyer was satisfied of that.

"What does it represent?"

"Probably twenty-five to thirty million," said the lawyer.

Hector nodded. His eyes were blurred; his brain was racing. He heard only faintly the further words of the lawyer:

"I will read the letter for you," he was saying. "And you, my dear friend, chosen by a Gonzolas who found sanctuary in your country, shall promise never to rest until you have achieved this task. There is one person in the West whom I commend to you, for he has been a friend of my family for fifteen years. Jacob Loewenstein, whom you may have met in your uncle's office. Meet him at the earliest possible moment. He will convey to you all that you need to know."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

AND still following the silver trail, Hector passed from one death-bed to another. He had not been back in London a week when he was summoned by a clerk in the sequestered office of Edward Gonzolas. "Old Mulberry Tree" had gone to his room early in the afternoon, saying to Hector that he had felt a great weariness creeping over him and that perhaps a little sleep might rest his brain.

They had discussed everything appertaining to the Chilean visit and there appeared to be little else to do than sit back and await the market developments. When Hector had told him of the fortune bequeathed to him, Edward Gonzolas had said: "All these happenings are predestined. My relative must have appraised you even as I. You are a young man—almost too young to have so great a burden placed on your shoulders. For money is a burden. May you be strong enough to bear the responsibility it entails. I am now the last of my line. Just a lonely old bachelor to whom money has come with ironic regularity."

The clerk who came to summon Hector to the master's sick-room that afternoon was white of cheek and lip.

"Sir, will you come quickly to Mr. Gonzolas. I looked into his room just now and I was frightened by the change that had come over him."

Hector went at once, strange forebodings in his mind and heart. From the City streets came the faint hum of traffic; it seemed to die down to a mere murmuring in sympathy as he approached the room.

Edward Gonzolas was lying on his bed. He had not been given time to undress before the faintness stole over him, but he had removed his office coat and slipped

on a faded dressing-gown. He smiled bravely as Hector approached the bedside.

"Dear old friend, what's this ?"

"I am old," said Gonzolas, and smiled again. "Almost as old, at least in my heart, as the mulberry tree in my little garden."

"I'll get the doctor here in two minutes," said Hector in alarm.

"It isn't the services of a doctor I require," said Gonzolas. "Listen, my boy—for I like to think that you are a son to me."

Hector leaned over the bed and touched the damp forehead.

"You have taught me to love you," he said. "That's all I can say."

"And I know that the words come from your very heart," said the old man. "It isn't strange that it should have come so quickly after the death of my relative. It has always been so : two Gonzolas to travel together along the Road, bound to each other by indissoluble ties."

"Let me send for a doctor," Hector pleaded.

"If you really love me, boy, you will send for one person—the only one I wish to see besides yourself before my eyes close."

"My aunt," said Hector, in a whisper, for great understanding was given him in that moment.

"Your aunt," said the old man. "I dare not go until I have seen her. I may be asking too much of her—there may be a thousand difficulties in the way of her getting here—but I feel in my heart that she will brave them."

"I will telephone," said Hector.

"No," said the old man, "you had better go in person." He smiled at a recollection. "Hector," he said, and the lines of his face seemed to be smoothed out in that minute, "I have often wondered if you guessed what she has meant to me all these years."

"I think I have," said Hector.

"Business and romance! They blend—sometimes. I love your aunt, boy. I have loved her ever since I was a young man, and I know that she has loved me."

"I know it, sir," said Hector.

"We might have broken all the laws of convention and slipped away, but business—silver—the reputation that business thrusts on a man—always held us back. . . . Boy, in that garden I have wooed her—in fancy." The dampness on his forehead became more pronounced. When Hector asked if he might bring brandy, the old man frowned resentfully. Couldn't he understand that this was the end. "Send Teesdale to me," he said. "Faithful old Teesdale who has been with me for thirty years. He will stay by the bedside until you return."

"I will go at once," said Hector.

"You may be refused admittance?"

"In that case I know exactly what to do," said Hector.

"Tell Teesdale."

"I will call him."

"Be good to Teesdale, Hector. He is privy to all my affairs. He knows that in the future—when I am no longer here—you will be master!"

Hector went from the room, but there was no need to make the journey to Grosvenor Crescent. The afternoon had worn on: the city offices had emptied themselves of clerks; the streets were comparatively quiet. And even as Hector threw open the door of the offices—the old-fashioned offices—a limousine came slowly around the corner and slid gently along. She was there; risking everything in order that she might glance at that little garden where for years he had dreamed his dreams, picturing her in each flower, each leaf.

The limousine stopped. She leaned forward as she marked Hector standing on the threshold of the offices. Her big patient eyes opened wide in nervous apprehension. He went forward and opened the door of the limousine. His own face was pale: his expression

conveyed something of the truth to her. She alighted, still without uttering a word. She accepted the support of his arm and walked with him to the door. As she stepped across the threshold she said to him :

"I know ! I know ! I saw him in my dreams last night. And you were standing there—just where I met you."

And for the first time in her life she entered the house offices, and home of the man whom she had loved with all her heart and soul since that day when first she met him—when they were no more than boy and girl together.

They climbed the winding oak stairway. Of the two she was outwardly the least emotional. Indeed, there was a magnificent restraint in her whole being. Into her eyes had come a great, glad light that etherealized her. It seemed to him, as he walked by her side, that she was passing to that paradise of which "Old Mulberry Tree" had spoken a little while before.

Old Teesdale, worn and faded in the service of the master he loved, came from the sick-room when he heard their footsteps on the stair. He had not expected Hector to return so quickly, he said, but Mr. Gonzolas had insisted that he would be away no longer than a few minutes.

It was just as though he could see through the walls," said the old clerk. "And I prayed that it might be so."

He stepped aside. Hector opened the door so that his aunt might enter the room.

Edward Gonzolas was lying just as he had left him. He turned his head slightly as the door opened. His eyes looked for hers in the dusk of the room. He was the first to speak.

"My dear !" he said. "My dear !"

That was all that Hector heard. She moved forward. She leaned over the pillow. Hector glanced back. Her head was resting on the pillow beside that of the man who loved her.

. . . . .

Downstairs, in the office old Teesdale whispered fearfully :

"Do you think he will die, sir ?"

"Yes," said Hector simply.

"It don't seem right, sir ! To take a man like that and leave so many that the world could well do without."

"He is happy," said Hector, and turned away. He went to the private room of Gonzolas and stared out of the black-netted window at the mulberry tree in which the birds of the City were already clustering for the evening and the night that was to follow.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE combined fortunes of Jose and Edward Gonzolas came into the hands of Hector. The aggregate would have tested the mental strength of a group of financiers: he was strangely unmoved by the vastness of his possessions—for a while. The most intimate of his friends said among themselves: "He is incapable of appreciating his changed fortunes, or the amount is so large that his brain is dead." They were wrong. It was the philosophy of Don Jose Gonzolas that held his emotions in check.

Out yonder, in Chile, the old Spaniard had never lost an opportunity of impressing on him the weight of the burden that great wealth must mean to any man. Moreover, Gonzolas had entrusted to him the carrying out of a great mission, and as he was similarly moved in his attitude towards Michael Stradde he deliberately blinded himself to his financial position until his mind could thoroughly grasp the magnitude of the task he essayed. He began by insisting to himself that never would he allow money to control his better self (always excepting his intentions towards Stradde). Money was power, but he would not allow arrogance to take the place of discrimination and so incite a poorer man, or the masses, to rebel against what they conceived to be the unfairness of life.

He began with these good intentions, but soon after he had liquidated the estates and business enterprise of the two Gonzolas—with the exception of the silver mine in Chile—he entered a block of new offices, equipped them regardless of expense, gathered around him a staff of brilliant assistants, and, figuratively, rolled up his sleeves for the fight on which he had set his heart. It

was then that his friends and acquaintances said of him: "The fever is on him! Here is another Stradde and, likely enough, he may prove an even sterner task-master."

He took over the lease of an imposing house overlooking Hyde Park, but although he kept a considerable staff of servants, there was little done in the way of entertaining: indeed, it was said of him that he never offered a cigar to a guest without seeing a profitable business deal through the smoke. While other rich men had their country houses, their hunters, racing stables, and fleet of cars, he was content with a well-furnished house, a fine swimming pool set on the top floor, and a small gymnasium. He was never in bed at five in the morning: his tall, powerfully built figure might have been seen striding through the park before breakfast; his head held high, his eyes bright with the light of ambition and, perhaps, the craving for revenge. In company he was reserved to the point of reticence: towards women he was studiously polite, but his coldness when they sought further to ingratiate themselves left them with a perfectly good idea of what an Esquimau might be like as he sat on the fringe of an ice-bound pool and waited for fish or seal. He was handsome and eligible, so extremely wealthy that he could have financed a hundred theatres, or a punitive expedition, yet he held himself aloof as though he were the poorest man in the City and compelled in consequence to safeguard every penny that came his way.

The markets of the world were getting into confusion. Firms of long standing were tumbling into bankruptcy. He appeared to be incapable of making a mistake. His advice was sought by high authorities: that which he had learned from the two Gonzolas appeared to have made him infallible. His advice was so sound that his name began to be mentioned with something akin to awe. They said of him: "He was only a junior—if that—in the firm of Stradde, Hamshaw and Bleeker.

How has he assimilated all this knowledge? Stradde himself could teach him nothing to-day." He was aware of these references to himself, and in the quiet of his study at home he went so far as to analyse himself. How had he done it? He couldn't say. The philosophy of the Gonzolas was uncanny, but the manner in which he had absorbed it was miraculous. His was the touch of Midas. Any business concern on which he set his finger instantly leaped into at least the semblance of prosperity. The newspapers were intrigued: they tried to draw him. "What is the secret of your success?" they asked. He would reply: "Work!" "But you never appear to take any relaxation?" "No, I must work," he would say. "But you are so wealthy! You cannot have need of any more money?" "No man should allow excess of money to rob him of the greatest joy in life—work," he would reply.

And when they had finished pestering him, he would ask of himself:

"What is the truth? You have made so much money, inherited so large a fortune, that there is nothing in life that you couldn't buy. And, that being so, you are satisfied that great wealth is a thief rather than a friend. One day, perhaps, you may learn of something saleable—something of which you had never dreamed. Then—and not till then—will you appreciate the significance of all these millions that have come into your possession."

He was a lonely man!

His uncle, Michael Stradde, had discovered the loneliness that great wealth generally brings to a man or woman. He had no friends, save Mauvine, that wonderful woman of mystery and talent. He might have bought a thousand beautiful women, but he would have discarded them the day after the purchase.

Hector knew that he could never hope to find anyone to take the place in his heart that had been occupied by Felice.

It was long after the death of Edward Gonzolas that

he met her again. Michael Stradde was meeting two Continental agents in the midlands (Hector was aware of their presence in the country ; he was made aware of the movements of his uncle, although he would not have allowed even Stradde's presence in the Grosvenor Crescent house to prevent his visiting his aunt).

It was late in the evening when he reached the house. He had not troubled to telephone, knowing full well that Mrs. Stradde would be keeping her lonely vigil in that wilderness of a drawing-room, wherein she had wasted the best years of her life.

His aunt embraced him with maternal affection.

"Tell me of Felice," he said.

"She is all I have to live for, now that you are gone, Hector."

"I am always with you in spirit, aunt."

"I know you are. And so is *someone* else."

"How deeply you loved him," said Hector in a whisper.

"I have never denied it to anyone," she replied. "Let me bring Felice to you here. She is in her room—writing, always writing."

"To whom ?"

"Try to understand, Hector. Her dear mind is gaining strength each succeeding day."

"Tell me, tell me. Don't keep me in suspense."

"She writes to someone who might have loved her in a previous existence."

"You mean that she still thinks of me ?"

"She thinks of someone who must be you. That's all I can say."

"I could have her taken abroad, aunt ? To some wonder place that might restore her completely to health."

"And leave me, Hector. You know that I couldn't go with her. My place is here."

"Oh, I could argue against that, aunt."

"And I, too, but"—she smiled pathetically—"I have

lived here, in this room, so long that I might feel strange and out of place in any other."

"In a tomb. That's what it has been, aunt."

"No, no. Oh, how can I explain my poor self? Here, in this room, I have written letters to *someone* I loved, just as Felice does now. Indeed, there are days when I know that *someone* leans over the back of my chair and guides the pen. Yes, you may smile, Hector."

"I do not smile, dear aunt. I understand."

"I'm just a foolish old woman."

He drew her to him and kissed her very tenderly.

"You believe what I believe," he said. "This long Road that we travel must lead to Somewhere—Somewhere that is a starting-point again."

"That is what I believe, Hector. And more!"

"You will meet others there."

"I believe." She broke away from his grasp and went quickly from the room. In a few minutes she returned leading Felice by the hand.

He stepped forward too quickly to give her reassurance. She felt for the hand of the aunt and stared at him affrightedly. Then, miraculously, the blankness went from her face. She smiled as he had known her to smile in the days when they were lovers.

"How foolish of me," she said, and rested a hand in his.

He would have taken her in his arms if it hadn't been for the warning gesture of his aunt.

"You are getting better, Felice," he said, gently.

"Soon I shall be quite well," she replied. "Did you think I had forgotten you, Hector?"

The fact that she called him by name stirred him deeply: then he reflected that his aunt might have coached her on the way to the room. In truth, she was immeasurably better. The slight, graceful form was eloquent of careful nursing. For ten minutes she talked to him about his work; she said she had read so much about his achievements. But not once did she refer to

the relationship that had existed between them before the death of her father, Sir Gerald. That tragic episode might never have happened. It seemed mercifully to have been eradicated from her mind.

"And when you are completely recovered, Felice, you will come to me ?" he asked.

"Of course," she said, and seemed surprised that he should have made the remark. "You are going to do so much in your business—aren't you ? When you have succeeded I shall come to you. Is that enough ?"

He looked at his aunt, understood the signal given, and gravely nodded to the girl.

A little while and he was on his way back to his own house. He dined alone, then retired to his study, and not till midnight was long past did he fling down his pen and papers and seek his bed.

He had no valet to wait upon him and render those little services that make the life of the rich man easier than that of the poor. He was so simple in his tastes, so independent of the millions he had inherited that, an ordinary clubman, given to a little extravagance, would have pitied him.

To the casual student of human nature he was no more than a unit in the vast army that peoples the earth. He had achieved no greater triumph than to become possessed of a gigantic, an almost incalculable fortune. He, himself, had reflected that there was really nothing purchasable that might make for him a new vision of earthly paradise : he was no richer than the man who just managed to pay his way and derive a little leisure.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

CLOUDS of depression were darkening the City life. Frenzied men were juggling with finance. Rumours of failures were coming across the telephone wires every half-hour. From America came warnings of financial crashes that couldn't be avoided. Politicians were shaking their heads sapiently and whispering that the burden of war debts was wearing down the strength of the whole world. In Italy, Mussolini, the son of a butcher in a humble station of life, was passing from strength to strength, forcing home his personality, compelling a sceptical world to watch, appraise, and hazard a guess at his intentions. France, gathering together all the gold she could lay hands on, was urging her people to work with the energy of giants, refrain from buying any goods that were not of French production, and apply their minds whole-heartedly to the maintaining of national dignity. Other countries were talking about Italy and France and openly criticizing this feverishness.

In London, newspapers were hinting in leading articles that all was not well—that in spite of the devastation wrought by the war ended in 'eighteen there was a fear that Mars might again reach for the sword. More indiscreet writers were actually asking what would be the attitude of Britain if the two Latins should fly at each other's throat. Would Britain cede Malta to Italy so that Mussolini's navy might have a base in the Mediterranean? Would France insist on dragging shattered England into another conflict? The war-weary replied that never again would they contribute to anything remotely approaching the cataclysmic horror of the Four Years' War. "Sell Malta to the Italians if they wish to buy it,"

said the masses. "Give it to them if they won't buy. But don't let us be stampeded into another ghastly outrage against civilization."

And silver was still falling! Germany had debased it; the British had debased it. The Far East was starving; their mills were closed; shipping was at a standstill; trade was stagnant. Eastern merchants were pleading for a better understanding. "You have so lowered the value of our silver," they said, "that we cannot afford to trade. Your gold standard has strangled us."

Michael Stradde was finding it more difficult to withstand the heat and turmoil of the battle. His two partners, Hamshaw and Bleeker, had become a menace to his schemes. Their courage was gone, but in its place had come sullen resistance to his overtures for more money with which to add to his silver holdings.

The newspapers began to goad. Why had Michael Stradde severed all connection with the theatre? Had his interest faded? Or was he conserving his financial strength for some other enterprise?

La Lune, ever shrewd, dared to reproach him for his lack of caution.

"They will follow up these questions with a hint that your financial position is not as strong as it was," she warned him.

"It isn't," he replied gloomily.

"The right thing to have done was to add to your theatrical enterprises," she insisted. "That would have put them off the scent."

"You are a woman," he said, rather bitterly, "and cannot be expected to see the situation as I see it."

They were in her Hampstead house at the time. He had come to her with a weary mind and body after a desperate conference with his partners in which he had played the bully for the last time.

She rested a hand on his knee, and said, compassionately, rather than reproachfully:

"Haven't I given up the whole of my life to the study of your work ? Haven't I tried to grasp the significance of every single movement you have made during the last few years ? Isn't the very word, silver, stamped on my personality. Why have I done all this ?"

He stared at the floor and said with some emotion :

"True, Mauvine. I wonder why you have done all this ?"

She answered him simply.

"Because I love you."

"I have tried to be good to you, Mauvine," he said—and he said it as though he would have her remember that all the affection wasn't on her side.

"You have been good, Michael," she agreed and looked around the sumptuously furnished room. "You have given me *nearly* all for which a woman is supposed to crave."

"*Nearly* all ?" he echoed.

"You settled a large sum upon me. I didn't ask for it, but you did it."

"It made you happier than you were, Mauvine ?"

"If money could make a woman happy—yes. But—but I am still Mauvine—'La Lune.' That and nothing more."

He glanced at her. He saw the tears that were trembling in her eyes. He grasped her hand and held it tightly.

"My dear !" he said with tenderness that was remarkable in him. "My dear, I can't do everything. There are some things that not even money can buy."

Instantly, her eyes lit up with courage. She moved nearer and kissed him on the cheek.

"That's over," she said, brightly. "It was only a passing weakness. I know that you would have done all I wish if the law could have been bent to your will. Come on, old soldier ! You came here, to-night, in a state of depression : my task is to cheer you. We'll dine at home—here—our home. And after dinner I'll

play and sing to you. And to-morrow you shall go to the office prepared to put new strength into those partners of yours."

"Great woman !" he said.

"You have made me great—if I am great," she said. "I like a fight as much as you do."

"You know that I regard you as the only woman fitted to be my partner."

"Let us drop all that sentimental talk," she said. "Let's forget everything save this hour of rest and relaxation from business."

"I must say what's in my mind, Mauvine," he insisted. "Always keep this before you : I regard you as the only *friend* I have in the world. And to a man in my position, faced with all the difficulties with which I am faced, a friend is much more valuable than—than——"

"Don't use that word, mistress," she pleaded. "Coming from your lips it burns like white-hot iron."

The tears had started again. He rose to his feet, turned and stooped so that he might press both hands to her cheeks. He kissed her.

"You are sweeter and dearer to me than any man-made law could make you," he said.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THERE was tension in the offices of Stradde, Hamshaw and Bleeker. Indifference had changed to conjecturing among the members of the staff. Clerk passed on to clerk the latest rumour : the Chief was in silver up to his neck and the price was falling as fast as he bought. Even Tom Slater, the outdoor messenger, was beginning to take an interest in the affairs of merchant princes, finding them more fascinating than his beloved film plays. He was beginning to understand all those jocular remarks of clerks in other firms when they passed him in the street or met him in the bank. "How's silver ?" "How much silver have you bought to-day ?"

The countenances of Hamshaw and Bleeker—especially Bleeker—betrayed to the staff that all was not well. Bleeker had become more pallid, nervous, irritable. Hamshaw walked with his hands clenched. Cables arrived and cables were sent in an endless stream. Confusion was creeping over the old firm. Heads of departments were perplexed : they asked for orders from Bleeker and Hamshaw, but they were told to "carry on" and not impede.

Only Grymdyke, the reticent private secretary of the Chief, went about his work as though nothing untoward was happening. Never was his tactfulness so pronounced as during those momentous days. It would have been easier for the proverbial camel to get through the eye of the needle than for any caller to see Michael Stradde without an appointment : even with an appointment he had to submit to careful examination of his credentials.

The fateful meeting was held in the Board-room. The two partners were fortified with facts and figures.

They had reached the end of their patience. In his private room, Stradde glanced at his watch.

"Ready, Grymdyke ?" he asked.

"Mr. Hamshaw and Mr. Bleeker are waiting, sir."

"Good l" He forced a smile. On the desk before him was a cablegram from Loewenstein. Another substantial "parcel" had been purchased. That fact in itself should convince the vacillating partners that Stradde was still full of confidence.

The purchase had been made early that morning. The news was conveyed to Hector in *his* office. A message had gone from Hector to *his* agents : "Fling more on the market l"

Stradde rose from his chair and washed his hands in the basin set in the alcove. He was still smiling as he came back to his chair.

"Give me my papers," he said to Grymdyke.

Grymdyke placed them in his hands and moved to open the door.

For the first time Stradde revealed to his secretary his feelings towards his partners. The smile departed ; his jowl jutted out.

"Let's pump courage into these *swine*," he said, and passed out to the corridor leading to the Board-room.

Grymdyke didn't even arch his eyebrows at the remark. He merely inclined his head after the manner of a well-trained butler. But when the door was closed on his chief he did a remarkable thing. He went to the sacred desk, opened a drawer, and examined the revolver he found there. For some time he had suspected its presence ; the fact that it was there sent him to the windows that looked down the square. His brows were rutted. He heard a voice coming from an adjoining window. It was Tom Slater, the outdoor messenger, calling to his pigeons :

"Come on, you beauties," he was calling. "Lord ! If I had wings like you have, do you think I'd stick

around this dirty hole of a City? Would I hell! It'd be me for Hollywood every time! Me and Belinda!"

In the Board-room the partners tackled the Chief. They fancied that his tail was beginning to droop. It strengthened them.

"Now, gentlemen!" said Stradde as he settled himself in his chair.

"We're faced with ruin," said Hamshaw, bluntly. Then, in quick, nervous phraseology he ran through the sorry story of deflated securities. Unless Stradde cut his silver losses nothing could save them from a debacle. Cut his losses! But at what a cost!

He said no word. His lips were tightly closed; he looked at his partners through two slits that represented his eyes. He listened to Hamshaw as though he had heard it all before but felt that it would be a waste of breath to interrupt. The freight market—one of their principal sources of income—had tumbled—the bottom was knocked out of it. The harbours of the country were choked with idle ships; there was nothing being exported. A large number of cargoes, bought by Hamshaw's department, remained unsold: Russia was dumping her wheat and produce at prices so low that to sell would mean the loss of a fortune to the firm. A speculation in timber had failed for the same reason.

And silver was still falling!

Bleeker received a nod from Hamshaw, cleared his throat, and said, nervously, that the only way to cover their liabilities was to raise a loan.

"I have made private inquiries about the amount we might hope to borrow on those ships of ours that are free of any encumbrance." He said this fearfully.

A silence fell. They saw the storm coming up against the wind. The expression on Stradde's face was awesome. The bull head seemed to increase in size; the veins of his neck bulged out; he clenched his right hand and struck the table a heavy blow.

"What ?" he roared. "This firm 'lombard' its ships ! By God, if an earlier Stradde had heard you make that suggestion he would have shot you dead."

Neither of the partners spoke. The fire in Stradde's eyes did not alarm them : they accepted the outburst as further proof of the weakening of the will. They glanced at each other, then looked down at their papers on the table. Even Bleeker felt stronger than the Chief in that moment.

Stradde regained control of himself. He wiped his damp forehead with a handkerchief and moistened his lips with the tip of his tongue. He appeared to have been exhausted by that outburst. Who would have believed that it could take so much out of him ? He was asking himself that question, and the other two knew it. He was like a champion pugilist who has beaten so many opponents that he neglects to train as carefully as in the old days : a heavy punch comes his way and for the first time he realizes that he is not invincible, that defeat is very near.

"Sorry," he said, breathlessly. (He was sorry for himself.) "Sorry," he repeated. "That remark of yours, Bleeker, took me by surprise. You weren't serious, of course. I should have seen that. No, we mustn't quarrel to-day. We mustn't break asunder. Understand ?"

They remained silent. They were watching the beaten pugilist struggling to his knees and so to his feet. They were rather sorry for him.

"We must stick together. Understand ? It's the united front that wins every time. Understand ? Silver is bound to rise. Understand ?"

That pathetic reiteration of the word "Understand" struck a note of tragedy. Hamshaw got up and filled a glass full of soda-water. He handed it to Stradde without a word and stood near his chair while he gulped it down. He took away the empty glass and set it on the small table near the siphon, then went back to his chair.

Stradde didn't appear to attach any significance to the service rendered.

"Bound to rise," he repeated, parrot-like. "And you believe that," he said, with a foolish laugh. "You would have me cut the losses now, but that's just nervousness on your part. Why didn't you urge it before ? Because you know that I haven't always been a buyer. I've sold in order to average. I've bought at forty-five and at thirty-five and sold for the sake of the difference. Averaging. Understand, Bleeker ? We've got to hold on now."

"Those who ought to know say that it will go below a shilling an ounce," said Bleeker.

Stradde stared at him as though he were amazed that Bleeker had the courage to speak out.

Hamshaw struck a blow :

"I suppose you are aware that, whenever you have bought, someone has flung more silver on the market ?"

Stradde threw up his head, challengingly.

"Well ?" he exclaimed.

"Do you know who it is ?"

"And I don't care," said Stradde, but he did.

"It is your nephew, Hector," said Hamshaw. "Although you ought to have known it, I have had the impression for some time that you were ignorant of it."

Stradde took the blow with splendid indifference and evasion.

"I have no nephew," he said.

There came a knock at the door—they knew it was Grymdyke. Stradde gave the answering signal by knocking three times on the table with his knuckles. Grymdyke brought in a letter and handed it to Stradde. As he read it his neck veins began to inflate. The manager of one of the firm's banks wished to see him on a matter of great urgency. He nodded to Grymdyke and began to get to his feet.

"May we inquire the nature of the news ?" Hamshaw asked.

"I—I am not in a position to acquaint you."

"We are your partners, Mr. Stradde."

"Yes—yes. Of course." He stared about him in a bewildered manner. Then, "We'll adjourn the meeting," he said, bluntly. He reached out a hand and grasped the arm of Grymdyke. Actually he was tottering! The big powerfully-built body seemed to have become loose and incapable of holding itself upright. Hamshaw and Bleeker rose quickly from their chairs, but Grymdyke, assuming the position of the protector, led his Chief from the room.

. . . . .

The bank manager locked the door of his private room after Stradde had taken a chair. Then, with the semblance of diffidence, but infusing a certain note of authority into his voice, he said:

"Mr. Stradde, we have here, from you, a greater number of bills than we are accustomed to receive from you. They have not come through the ordinary bill-brokers, but were sent to us by your firm to discount. May I ask why this has been adopted?"

Stradde's lips began to move, but it was some time before he could frame a reply, and even then it was a feeble evasion.

"Extr'ordin'ry!" he managed to say. "The firm of—of Stradde, Hamshaw and Bleeker. With a standing—a standing——"

"Quite so," said the manager, quietly and with dignity. "Of course you understand that I am not acting on my own initiative. I know that your firm has a reputation extending over——"

"Nearly a hundred and fifty years," said Stradde, firmly.

"Exactly," said the manager. "It isn't the first time the bills have come through the firm."

"And no objection has ever been raised?"

"No, Mr. Stradde. But when I saw this large sum

(he indicated the heap of papers), and noted the firms on whom they were drawn, I felt bound to submit the matter to my Board——"

"Well? Well?" The enfeebled lion was trying to work itself into a rage.

"I regret to say, Mr. Stradde, that I am instructed to inform you that the bank cannot see its way to accommodate your firm in this manner, unless—" With a faint smile he added: "Unless you deposit saleable securities with the bank."

The lion was dazed by the shot. The wound was in the region of the heart—or seemed to be. He felt the blood rush to his face, then rush away, leaving him icy cold. The big, powerful hands seemed to lose their strength: he couldn't have lifted a finger. The manager was scrutinizing his face. Stradde knew that he *must* have the money the bills represented—he must have the money to meet the bills the firm had accepted. Non-payment would mean bankruptcy! And bankruptcy would mean the trampling into the dust of a reputation that spread over a hundred and fifty years—a reputation gained in every part of the world.

He called on a reserve of physical strength. He felt the old glow of enthusiasm coming back to him. He could fight when his back was against the wall. He had fought a thousand fights in his career and won every time. But this was the greatest fight of all. He must win—win.

He laughed patronizingly as he replied:

"You ought to know perfectly well that we don't keep large stocks of saleable securities. There is our fleet, for instance."

It was the manager's turn to smile indulgently.

"Yes, Mr. Stradde," he said, "but shipping is not what it was, and the bank has advanced such large sums to other firms on the security of their ships that the Board will not allow any more."

Stradde gulped down something that had risen to his

throat. He wanted to leap at this poor miserable sycophant—this servant of the bank who had always been so unctuous in the presence of a member of his firm. He wanted to smash him between the eyes for daring to send for him and talk to him in this strain. He recovered composure.

"I didn't mean to borrow on the security of those ships," he said. "I was only going to say that the fleet alone represents a sum of——"

"Exactly," said the manager with exasperating calm, "and so, no doubt, do other assets of your firm, but what you are now asking for is a blank credit which in these days is impossible——"

"Stop!" said Stradde. "Forget the ships. You know that we are holding a large quantity of silver. I can deposit with you the warrants and certificates."

That ought to satisfy this smirking swine of a manager! This poor little cog in the wheel of business!

But why did his lips curl in contempt? By God, he was taking a liberty!

The voice of the manager came with the chilling effect of November rain. Stradde actually shivered as he listened.

"The bank has no faith in silver, Mr. Stradde. Have you seen the latest drop in price? Down to twelve pence! Your holdings must have cost you something."

Stradde's fingers grasped a pen from the inkstand on the table: they twisted the pen this way and that. The pen snapped as though it were a match-stick. He could hear a roaring in his ears. That would be the City laughing in derision as the firm took the "knock". One last shot:

"I don't care a damn what the holdings cost. I can sell, even at a shilling. I don't want credit. Understand?"

He must think, think, think! The firm had three or four other banking accounts in London, but was it any

use appealing to them? Some damn' silly rumour had spread around. These banks had long ears and many spies. Nothing escaped them. They were never to be caught off their guard. He knew he had been indiscreet about those bills: he should have sold them through a bill-broker.

The manager interrupted his train of thought.

"If you will sign this, Mr. Stradde, I will hand over to you the bills. I suppose you will want them."

Stradde signed the receipt mechanically, took up the bundle of bills and left the bank. In the street he removed his hat, grateful for the cooling wind. He went back to his office. He stumbled, rather than walked along the corridor to his private room. He slumped into his chair.

Grymdyke glided in and placed a private cable on his desk, then withdrew. It was a code cable from Loewenstein. Another blow, full in the face! Loewenstein had failed in his attempt to discount some large bills Stradde had sent him!

Again Grymdyke glided in noiselessly with a second message from Loewenstein.

Stradde's fingers could scarcely turn the pages of the code book.

"Awkward rumours about firm coming from London. Instruct."

So! It had come to that—had it? The scandal-mongers were busying themselves already. Something must be done immediately. He knew that. First get the financial tangle straightened out; then he would deal with the gossips! And deal with them only as Michael Stradde could. By God, he would lash them to heel! And he'd bleed them to death in his chosen time! None should escape him. He picked up the bundle of bills from the desk on which he had thrown them. He didn't know where he was going, but he must get out.

Hamshaw came in without knocking at the door. He

was pale with emotion ; there was the red light of fear in his eyes. He tottered to the desk.

"Bad news, Stradde ! Bad news !"

No "Chief" ! No "Mr. Stradde" ! No respect.

Stradde nodded promptingly : his own heart was beating frenziedly.

"The bank in Hong Kong cables that Furthow has stopped payment and want cover at once !"

Hamshaw gasped out the words and turned to grasp a chair to support himself. Thus, he didn't mark the crumpling up of Stradde as he dropped into his.

"Chief ! Stradde ! Speak ! Do something !"

Stradde was staring at the desk : his face was like a death mask.

Another disaster !

Furthow stopped payment ! Was that the reason why the bank had refused to discount those bills ? Had they heard the news from Hong Kong ?

A knock at the door—a timid, hesitant knock.

Hamshaw looked at Stradde.

"Come in," Hamshaw called, arrogating to himself the right to command.

Stradde gripped the arm-rest of his chair and tried to get to his feet. If this was the fight for which he was waiting he would show them that he had some stomach for it.

It was the commissionaire. Without saying a word he brought in the early edition of an evening newspaper and placed it on the desk. He withdrew as quietly as he had entered.

Both Hamshaw and Stradde stared at the paper and waited for each other to pick it up. They knew that the commissionaire was not in the habit of bringing in an early newspaper to that room unless there was something of great import in it.

Stradde laughed unpleasantly as he reached for the paper and opened it. They could have seen that heading a mile away :

"HONG KONG MERCHANTS STOP PAYMENT! LARGE LONDON FIRM SAID TO BE HEAVILY INVOLVED! DEFICIT SAID TO RUN INTO MILLIONS!"

Again they looked at each other. Of the two, Hamshaw was the most perturbed. His cheeks had lost all semblance of colour: his lips were twitching. He was now relying on Stradde. Surely, surely, that colossal brain would evolve a way out of the difficulties by which they were menaced.

And Stradde was saying to himself: "Will our firm go the way of Furthow?" They might try to sell ships and silver, but . . . the City would increase their handicaps by their damnable rumours.

"All right," he said to Hamshaw—said it in the voice of one weakling trying to stimulate another. "We'd better move! Action is essential."

"Yes," said Hamshaw, but he had only partially heard: he was thinking now of his wife—his fluffy-brained wife and her social ambitions. If the smash should come and the firm fall into bankruptcy, what would become of her? Many a time she had dared to criticize Stradde and hint at just such a possibility as this.

Stradde looked at the bundle of bills rejected by the bank. He rang for Grymdyke.

"Can you get old Leeper here at once, Grymdyke?" he said, "but don't let him know or understand that the matter is urgent."

Old Leeper was a bill broker. And Michael Stradde, once the man of iron nerve, hated and feared in the City, masterful, arrogant—Michael Stradde meant to ask of Leeper a favour!

Fate, in weaving her tragedies, loves to play with extremes.

Tension! Tension! Tension! Nerves strung up, voices lowered to whispers. In the general office the clerks were passing the news to each other. A news-

paper had been brought in: they had read of the Furthow affair. They asked each other, "How much has the firm been caught for?" They even passed on the question to the head book-keeper: he refused to satisfy their curiosity. But he *knew*!

Old Leeper the bill-broker came to the private office of Stradde. Strange, uncanny looking fellow, Leeper. Lean and hungry looking, in spite of his reputed savings and earnings. Walked slowly, looked suspiciously at everybody. Gimlet eyes, hooked nose that was always damp at the point. Other merchants in the City wouldn't have dreamed of employing Leeper in any circumstances, but Stradde had a peculiar fondness for the fellow. The affection began when Stradde actually rendered the man a service: Stradde had said to himself at the time: "I have bought that man body and soul," and he was very nearly right. Leeper would sell bills for the firm as though they were his own; he would squeeze a fraction out of a buyer. . . .

"Sir?"

"Any demand for bills, Leeper?"

The old man shook his head. He hadn't been around the City that day.

"Get to business, Leeper! I have some bills here and I want to know what you can do. Otherwise, they go to Paris to be sold."

"Do that, Mr. Stradde," said the old man, confidentially. "Send them to Paris." He tip-toed near the chair as though there were other listeners in the room. Only Hamshaw was there. Leeper whispered: "There's no market to-day for those bills!"

"What do you mean by that?" Stradde asked.

"Don't be angry with me, Mr. Stradde. I'm afraid the market has had enough of your bills."

Stradde leaped to his feet, his face red with rage.

Old Leeper held his ground.

"God knows it hurts me, Mr. Stradde, to have to say it."

"How do you know ? How do you know ?"

"A firm that bought a large number of your bills in the last few months told me that no more were required —whatever that may mean."

Stradde passed a hand over his forehead, then pressed both palms to his temples.

"Go on," he said. "Which firm ?"

And Old Leeper replied :

"Gonzolas Brothers !"

"Gonzolas !" Stradde echoed and his lips tightened the instant after the word was out of his mouth.

Hector ! Hector was carrying out his threat !

Stradde said weakly : "Edward Gonzolas is dead. I thought the business had been liquidated."

"The firm carries on," said Leeper, and Stradde knew that he was referring to the activities of his nephew, Hector. "And the firm holds bills of yours to the extent of two millions. They have been selling silver, too—heavily. Their last sale, to-day, brought the market down to twelve pence !"

"That will do," said Stradde, and turned from the old man. "Thanks for coming along to see me. Good of you. I'll remember it."

Hamshaw looked at Stradde when the door was closed and asked faintly : "What now ?"

"The obvious thing," said Stradde. "I'll go to see Hector !"

CHAPTER NINETEEN

HE hadn't the strength of will to go straight to the offices of his nephew. He instructed the chauffeur to drive here and there until the courage came. A thousand thoughts flashed through his mind. A thousand comparisons suggested themselves. Money! What had it done for him? Why had he bartered the best years of his life for silver? If only he had acted as Mauvine had suggested long ago! If only he had stolen out of business and taken a small country house with her! He might have found great happiness with Mauvine—the only woman who had ever made real appeal to his senses. He wondered what was going on in the mind of Hamshaw. And that doll of a wife of his—what would she say when she learned that in place of a knighthood Hamshaw might have to toddle along to Carey Street and answer the questions of the Official Receiver? Little fool! Little, empty-headed fool! How the hell had a man like Hamshaw come to pick her up? And there was Bleeker! Poor Bleeker! For the first time in his life Stradde was sorry for Bleeker. He was so frail a piece of humanity: he ought never to have entered the City. He should have kept bees in some quiet country village. Would Bleeker have the courage to withstand the calumny that might be heaped on the firm within the next few weeks? . . .

Hector said to the clerk who brought the card:

"Show him in." Then he sat down at his desk and pretended to write. He was unusually pale. There was a hard look in his eyes. He had known for a long while that this crisis would be reached: he had waited for it with the avidity of a wronged man awaiting the moment when the positions should be reversed and the oppressor placed in the seat of the oppressed.

Stradde had stiffened his back while awaiting the summons. He would bluff through this, he told himself. There should be no reference to bygones. He would be the clear-thinking business man devoid of enmity. He walked into the private office with the mien of a relative—a happy, lovable relative returning from a long journey.

"My dear Hector! How are you?"

And a harsh, even brutal voice, answered:

"Sit down, *Mr.* Stradde, but make your stay as short as possible: I have so much to do before the office closes for the day."

Stradde was thrown out of his stride. His swagger departed. He was conscious of a sickness in the pit of his stomach.

"Hector, I am your uncle. Don't forget that."

Hector had risen to his feet.

"I do not recognize the relationship, Mr. Stradde," he said.

Stradde beat down the angry retort that rose to his lips.

"Let us talk business, then," he said. "I heard that you are holding some bills of ours. I wondered if you were disposed to take some more?"

Hector looked him straight in the eyes.

"Why come to me?" he asked.

Tiny blobs of sweat began to form underneath Stradde's eyes. He had said to himself on the way from the office that Hector was his last hope; but Hector wasn't betraying anything like friendliness.

"I'll be quite frank with you, Hector," he said at last. "You may have heard some of the rumours about the firm——"

"Who hasn't?"

"We are holding so much silver——"

"Are you hoping that I will buy your silver?"

Stradde's voice was weakening: he could feel that he was fighting a losing battle.

"We are a little short of money," he blurted out. "Must meet certain liabilities next week. I—I thought that if I came to you and placed my cards on the table——"

Hector's lips turned in contempt.

"There's nothing in your hand of cards, Mr. Stradde, that isn't known to me," he said.

"Look here, Hector——"

"I know what you are going to say, Mr. Stradde—that silver will rise and that if I accommodate you now you will repay . . . and all the sorry rest of it."

"I want help, Hector. I'm not a fool—I know that you hold a very strong hand. Let's be friends—just for a few minutes—so that I can explain the position of the firm."

"I know the position of your firm, *Stradde*! My agents keep me informed of everything in the world of business. They have told me that Stradde, Hamshaw and Bleeker is on its last legs, that within a few weeks, days, it will crumple up and wither under public contempt."

"Think of all I did for you, Hector!"

"I have thought of everything," said Hector. "No, I will not help your firm."

Stradde flung out his hand entreatingly.

"For God's sake, boy——"

"I am not a boy," said Hector. "I am a man, and an old man in spite of my years. You and your partners have made me old before my time. You set your heels on my happiness and crushed it, just as I am working to crush you now."

Stradde was bending at the knees. Was it conceivable that this one-time Croesus, this one-time giant in the City, was going to fall on his knees and plead for help?"

"Look, Hector, to show you how terrible is my plight, how great my need, I will go down on my knees to you and beg for help."

Hector said sharply :

"Don't do that! Don't do it. You recall to my mind a scene that took place in your study in Grosvenor Crescent. Remember it? When Sir Gerald Greaves went down on his knees to you, begging, praying for a little relief from the agony you were piling on him. Damn you, recall that scene for yourself and then ask me for help."

"Hector, just a minute——"

"No," said Hector decisively. "Your firm must sink. The silver you have bought and bought against the best of advice will weigh you down. I told you once that I would make the coffins of you and your partners of silver. It was a figure of speech, but there was a great deal of ironic truth in it."

"Hector, I know that silver will rise and I will repay a hundredfold for the help."

Hector flashed back:

"Stradde, I have enough money to buy a hundred and more firms in this city. I don't want any more. Money has bought for me all that there was left to buy—this moment of triumph. I've seen you broken, or rather, I shall see you broken."

"I tell you, Hector, that silver will yet save us: make us mightier than any other firm in the world. Only to-day I had a cablegram from my most trusted agent, Loewenstein. You remember Loewenstein, Hector? Fine fellow. Shrewd, too. Listen! He tells me that the upward movement is already taking place."

Hector laughed mockingly.

"It is possible that you are a fool as well as a rogue?" he asked bitterly. "Loewenstein? Silver must have blunted your senses." He stopped: his teeth grated; he stepped to the door, opened it and called: "Come in!"

Amazed, scarcely believing his own eyes, Stradde stared at the man who stepped into the room from the corridor. Then he said lifelessly:

"Loewenstein! My God! Loewenstein!"

Hector said: "Yes, Loewenstein, *my* most trusted agent."

Stradde looked from face to face. The mouth of the Jew was eloquent of utter contempt—contempt for the "giant" who was now dwindling to the porportions of a pigmy.

"*Your* trusted agent?" he echoed.

"Mine," Hector affirmed. "He has kept me supplied with all the information I required concerning your operations. . . . All right, Loewenstein, you had better leave this to me. . . . Stradde, you may remember the time when you built those offices of yours. Think! I want to explain Loewenstein's position. The wing of the offices in which your rooms are situated is on ground where formerly there were a number of small shops. Unknown to the poor occuerpis, you bought those premises, one by one, and then ejected the tenants. You threw them out. Didn't care a damn what might happen to them. You had money; they had none. One of the tenants was a Jew named Lyon. The night you threw him out of his little place he pleaded with you to let him stay: his wife was expecting to be confined that very night. . . ."

"I don't remember anything of the sort," he said, but he was breathing hard.

Hector went on:

"Lyon pleaded for a little mercy. You had him flung out of your office by a commissionaire. Poor devil! He was driven to the verge of madness by your action. His wife gave birth to a child—where? Under a railway arch!" Hector's face was rigid with passion for a moment. "Mother and child died in the open, with only the husband and father near. You killed them."

Stradde made an impatient gesture.

"But, Hector, what—what has this to do with——"

"I'll tell you, Stradde. The Jew, Lyon, swore to be revenged. He left England, changed his name and became—Loewenstein, your trusted agent!"

"I don't believe it!" said Stradde. "I can't believe it."

Loewenstein made a forward movement.

"Let me tell him," he said to Hector.

"No," said Hector. "This moment is mine; yours will come when the reputable firm of Stradde, Hamshaw and Bleeker figures in the bankruptcy list." He swung to the possibilities of silver. "He knows more about silver and the market than any other man on earth. He fooled you into doing exactly what he wanted you to do. He dug your grave and helped you to roll into it."

Stradde fascinated Loewenstein in that moment. He appeared to be more rational than his nephew. He was staring at Loewenstein, not accusingly but contemptuously.

"I always paid you highly for your services, *Jew*," he said.

And Loewenstein replied bitterly:

"My wife and child died in the roadway, under a railway arch."

"Yes," said Hector, "and his friends made a collection among themselves to meet the funeral expenses. Laugh at this, Stradde; the friends were poor people; they collected exactly *thirty shillings*."

Stradde was still staring at Loewenstein.

"I trusted you implicitly," he said.

"You did," said Hector and laughed mockingly. "He trapped you into buying so much silver that you must have thought you had it all. You were the laughing-stock of the financial world. Mr. Gonzolas told me that. He knew Loewenstein. When Loewenstein bought a 'parcel' of silver for you with one hand he flung a 'parcel' on the market with the other—Gonzolas's silver."

"Judas!" said Stradde, staring at Loewenstein.

"Names don't hurt," said Hector. "Do you think that either Loewenstein or myself care a hang what you say or do now?"

One more futile appeal :

"Hector, I'm your uncle. If that firm should go down the shame of it will reflect on you."

"It will go down," said Hector, "and the lower it falls the better it will please me. I told you that I would kill the firm. You may go on buying silver until your hair is the colour of it. I shall continue to throw it on the market."

Stradde changed his attitude. He was losing his nerve again.

"I must get money," he said desperately.

"But not from me."

"Look here, Hector, I have taken great risks ? I have mortgaged everything. Unless I get money immediately we are done."

"*You* are done," said Hector. "Not I."

"Do you mean to say that you would allow me and that old firm to sink—to be crushed out, to become bankrupt—to become the contempt of every man in the City ?"

"Why not ?"

"My boy," said Stradde, "you cannot be capable of thinking of what all this means."

"Stradde," said Hector, "I can think clearly. You have been gambling in silver for years ; you have crushed everything under your heel in order to make yourself a silver king. Which was absurd ; silver has poisoned your mind as it has poisoned the mind of many others. Any man who tries to make a market in silver is a damn' fool. Loewenstein knew that. You have regarded him as your best friend ; I've shown to you that he was your biggest enemy. . . . Loewenstein, don't speak ; this is my show. . . . Loewenstein fooled you. You killed the father of my sweetheart ; that fact doesn't seem to impress you. I said that I'd make you pay dearly and I am going to do it. Stradde, I could lend you ten to twenty millions, without inconveniencing myself. I wouldn't lend you ten cents."

Stradde cried out like the coward that he was becoming:

"Hector, I'll do anything—anything you like to ask if you'll help me out of this difficulty."

"Look at Loewenstein," said Hector, and laughed bitterly. "There is the man who could persuade me. Ask him to ask me for the loan in your behalf and I swear that I will do what he dictates."

Loewenstein, the Jew—the Jew who saw his wife and child die under a railway arch—said:

"I wouldn't lend him a penny."

"That's your answer," said Hector. "Take it back to the office; go to your partners, Hamshaw and Bleeker! Tell them that so far as I'm concerned they are down and out. I believe, although I'm not sure, that I could put the three of you in gaol; the public might laugh at your predicament but that wouldn't be of any satisfaction to me. Stradde, I told you I would make your coffin of silver and, by God, I will."

Stradde went from Hector's office with his tail between his legs; he knew that he had nothing to hope for. It was seven o'clock in the evening when he got back to the office; the staff was gone. The commissionaire was hoping to get away and rather arrogantly he said to Stradde:

"You're late, sir?"

"That's my business," said Stradde and went on to his private room.

Grymdyke was gone. He had left a note: "I do not expect you back to-night, sir. There have been several trunk calls about which I must see you in the morning. Especially about Stanforth; he is pressing."

Hell to Stanforth; he wanted money. Stradde sat down at his desk and stared at the papers in front of him. Everything was falling! Many a time he had looked at disaster without knowing the meaning of the word defeat, but this time he looked at it as one who knows he cannot elude it. The workings of his mind were strange. He had been a giant in finance, so he told

himself, and he was not going to let the City think that he was no more than a pigmy. If he had to go down, he'd go down fighting. Hector could have helped him but Hector was a prig who didn't know the ethics of business. Hector was still dominated by sentiment when he ought to understand that sentiment was not part and parcel of City life.

What was that noise ?

What was that bump ! bump ! outside the window ? He didn't get up from his chair, he told himself that he was just fretful, moody ; it was the closing of a door somewhere—a door that wouldn't shut.

Bump ! Bump !

With a rasping of cloth against a brick wall !

What the devil was it ? Dusk had come ; the City was quiet. The men who controlled millions of capital were gone back to their wives in the suburbs and in the country ; there was no sound of traffic—that had died down, the day was ended ; he was alone in his office.

Bump ! Bump !

Damnation ! The sound got on his nerves ; he jumped from his chair and went to the window. The City pigeons were circling around the office ; they appeared to be afraid of *something* ; they wanted to come to rest on the ledges for the night, but there was something swinging ! Bump ! Bump !

It was the body of Bleeker, his partner !

Bleeker had taken his life. He had fastened one end of a rope around a desk and the other around his neck ; and then he had jumped from the window !

Stradde looked at the swaying thing and with tremendous self-control went back to his desk. There he picked up the telephone.

"Give me the police station," he said.

He asked for someone to come around and remove the body. He laughed as he gave the order—laughed like one who knows that his own brain is cracking.

CHAPTER TWENTY

HE recovered himself sufficiently to telephone through to Hamshaw's country house. Funny that he should get quite a sensation out of being able to tell of Bleeker's death.

Mrs. Hamshaw came to the telephone. She might be a doll—a fluffy-brained doll—but now that she knew something of the truth she could be rude.

"Hamshaw's not in," she said. "If he has any courage he's trying to get out of the ghastly mess into which you have flung him."

"I want to tell you about Bleeker." That was all he could say.

"I've seen this coming for a long while."

"I want to tell you about Bleeker. I want to tell you——"

"I warned Hamshaw against you long ago. I'm getting my jewels together; he'll want them. Oh, you fools!"

"About Bleeker . . . He's hanged himself!"

"Oh, I knew he would do a thing like that. Hamshaw won't. I'll see to that. Why don't *you* do it?"

Hell! She was a virago.

"I—I want to see Hamshaw," he said.

"He can't come to town to-night. I have a dance on. Understand?"

"Oh, yes, I understand." He laughed hysterically. "For God's sake don't spoil your dance."

He hung up the receiver. He wished that Grymdyke hadn't gone home; it was the first time that Grymdyke had ever let him down; always he had been able to rely on Grymdyke's calm. Poor Grymdyke! Faithful

servant for many years. Who would get him now that the crash had come?

He looked through the window; the pigeons were alighting on the ledges; the body had been taken away. There had been many inquiries by the police; he had answered them all. The police inspector had said: "Would you like me to stay with you, sir? Or accompany you home?" And he had replied: "No, these are happenings that we must expect in days of trouble. Come to see me in the morning."

The police had been remarkably tolerant of his mood. He said to himself as he sat there that they had looked at him as though they couldn't believe their own ears.

Bump! Bump! Bump!

Why couldn't he shut out that sound?

Bleeker was dead! Poor old Bleeker! No courage. How he had hated Bleeker during the last two years—hated him because he was so weak! And now he was dead! It didn't seem real; life didn't seem real. He wondered what Hamshaw was doing; he wondered what his little doll wife was really thinking: she had hoped to be "Lady" Hamshaw. Poor empty-headed little fool!

Money! He must get money. But where? There are times when even a reputed millionaire finds it extremely difficult to raise a hundred pounds in cash; with the City full of rumours about the impending fall of the firm, he knew that he couldn't hope to raise much.

Strange that he didn't think of his wife in these moments of extreme agitation; perhaps his subconscious self said: "You have starved her brain so that she is incapable of thinking of how she might help you."

She would be sitting there in the drawing-room keeping vigil, as always she had done.

He was walking about his office now—walking blindly, picking up pens and papers and flinging them down again. He was listening—he didn't know for

what. The pigeons were gathered on the ledge of the window: he took no notice of them. The firm was down and out! He knew that. He had gambled and gambled without taking his partners into his confidence: the smash was imminent! He could see the face of the Official Receiver. He could see the newspapers shrieking: "Smash of a great City firm!" For generations that firm had stood for all that is meant by integrity and progress. In the Far East, the natives mentioned the firm as though it represented England. The ships of the firm had sailed every sea: its house flag compelled homage in every water. Men had said of the firm: "If it is Stradde and Partners, it is all right." What would they say now?

Gambled? God, how he'd gambled. Not in thousands, but in millions! And what had Hector said to him? What had Hector proved to him. That Loewenstein, the Jew—that little insignificant-looking Jew—had wrecked the firm of Stradde and Partners because his miserable little wife had died in childbirth beneath a railway arch! Clever little devil, Loewenstein. The Jews were clever; back over the centuries the Romans denied the Jews the right to enter any trade: they made of them money-changers, and so they sat at the doors of the temple and, as serfs, exchanged money; and they had accepted their humble station, but made of it a profession so that they were masters of finance.

Fancy Loewenstein fooling him! It was incredible because he had believed himself to be a genius in finance, yet Loewenstein had led him on, urging him to buy parcel after parcel of silver until he was loaded down with it; he couldn't sell it: the banks would laugh at it if he offered it. Twelve pence an ounce!

The brain was darting about like a dragon-fly caught in the rain—alighting here, swirling there, seeking a shelter from that which harassed it. Bleeker dead! Dam' funny, really! He didn't think Bleeker had the courage to do a thing like that. Fancy Bleeker trying

to mortgage the ships! And off his own bat, too! Hadn't Bleeker squirmed when he was asked what he meant by trying to "lombard" the ships of so great a firm?

It was nearly ten o'clock now. Dusk had deepened into darkness, but he didn't switch on the lights. He rather liked the darkness—it was the only thing in sympathy with him.

If there was a chance for him, he told himself, it was not in England. He must get abroad. He could start again. He wasn't old. Mauvine had insisted that he was the youngest man in the City when it came to hard fighting.

Mauvine! Of course, she was the only one in the world who could help him. He had done so much for her—hadn't he? Thousands of pounds he had passed into her keeping. He must go straight to her.

He went downstairs and looked for the limousine that ought to have been there. It was gone! He laughed rather pathetically. "They're all deserting me," he said aloud. He called a taxi.

. . . . .

He wondered why the driver of the taxi stared at him. Did the swine think there was a doubt about his getting his fare?

He shut his eyes tightly as the taxi wove its way through the traffic towards Hampstead. He didn't want the people on the pavements to point him out and shout: "There he goes! Stradde, who was a millionaire yesterday, or not long ago, and is now trying to sneak out of the country!"

For years he had been expecting the crash. His partners were fools to have trusted him. He laughed at the recollection of those meetings in the Board-room when he bullied them out of their cowardice. Of course he knew that they were right, but he didn't dare admit it.

And yet if silver had jumped a dozen points he would have sold and made millions. He would have been the richest man in all England. Great Scot! He would have been rich enough to finance a revolution. Ah! That had been a dream of his, but he hadn't said a word about it to anyone—not even to Mauvine. He might have *bought* a Dictatorship with his immense wealth! Think of that! Who dared to say that money hadn't power? The fools! Money could buy anything. It could depose kings and set a man like Michael Stradde on the throne of the Dictator! Of course, money came first in the affairs of man. It must always be so. . . . Drive on! Drive on! How slowly this plebeian rat was driving his ramshackle of a taxi! A Dictator could buy a fleet of thousands of speedy cars.

But he wasn't a Dictator. He had to realize that fact. So he pressed his palms to his temples and tried to beat down the storm that was raging in his mind. He said to himself: "I'm sane! Never was saner in my life! I may do anything with impunity. I could stop this taxi and fling a stone through the windows of that great shop window! I'd love to do that. Just to show my authority!"

Then back to the semblance of sanity! The brain took a delight in hoaxing him. "Now you're sane," it would say, "and now you're hopelessly insane."

He had no money! How preposterous! He might not be able to pay this driver the amount of the fare, but—well, he could strangle him if he protested against being bilked!

It wasn't feasible that a man might be a millionaire one day and a beggar the next. It was incredible that he couldn't put his hands on a few thousands, ready cash. The banks wouldn't lend it. The banks knew that he was smashed.

No, Mauvine was the only refuge—the only sanctuary. She would let him have five or six thousand pounds

and he would go to Croydon and fly out of the country. Then he would await her in some small, secluded village —possibly in Italy, or France. They would live out their life in peace and content and to hell with the rest of the world. Beautiful Mauvine! Faithful Mauvine! Why go to that silent slave in the Grosvenor Crescent house? Would she help him in his extremity? Not likely! She would be the first to laugh at him in his predicament.

He must get out of the country. There were certain things in his commercial life about which only he himself knew—there were certain pieces of business that might easily be construed into fraud if there should be an official examination of the firm's books—there were ugly little incidents that might be twisted into glaring offences against the laws of commerce.

He knew that the end had come. The gamble was over and done with! He had lost. Within a few hours the newspapers of London would be screaming the news.

Bleeker's death had already been made public. The newspapers would follow up the tragedy. It would be a natural question to ask why Bleeker had taken his life if the affairs of the firm were all right.

He wondered where Hamshaw had hidden himself? Slimy Hamshaw. Always he had secretly distrusted Hamshaw, disliked both him and his wife; openly he had despised Bleeker: in his heart of hearts he had felt that he would rather trust Bleeker, fool though he was.

Fancy Bleeker hanging himself like that! Rather plucky of him! But did one require courage so that one might commit suicide?

What could have rushed through Bleeker's brain in the few minutes immediately proceeding his last desperate act? Poor little Bleeker! The whining voice seemed to come through the roar of the traffic into the taxicab Bleeker had always been wanting money

for his department; he had always been afraid that the silver gamble would land the firm in bankruptcy.

Bleeker must have had tremendous nerve towards the end.

It was a gruesome thing to do to tie one end of a long rope around an article of furniture in the office and the other end to one's neck; then deliberately climb out on a window-ledge and fling oneself over into space. Think of the awful strain when the end of that tether was reached!

Stradde could still hear that bump! bump! as the body swung against the brick wall.

Hamshaw would get a shock when he came to look into affairs. Everything was mortgaged up to the hilt. The newspapers would say that never in the history of the City of London had there been so complete a wreckage of business. Michael Stradde had taken a reputation that spread over a hundred and fifty years and smashed it beyond repair.

Stradde was satisfied of this: he couldn't face his accusers. He hadn't many hours of freedom left—that was how he looked at it.

Although he had expected just such a culmination as this to all his projects in the event of silver not rising, he was bitterly resentful against Heaven that it had come with such dramatic suddenness. He must have at least five thousand pounds with which to get abroad—in cash! How ridiculous a situation! He, Michael Stradde, a millionaire by repute, standing in need of five thousand pounds! Why, he had written not one, but twenty five-figure cheques in connection with his theatre enterprises alone—thrown the money away as though it had no significance.

. . . . .

As the taxi approached the Hampstead house of La Lune, Stradde tapped imperatively on the window to stop the man from driving further. He had seen

someone come down the steps. And the semi-darkness couldn't hide from the diseased brain the features of Lord Pynton. The lights from the house windows seemed to pick out the angular face with malicious intent.

What was Pynton doing there? What was there between Mauvine and this elderly aristocrat? An already inflamed brain caught greedily at jealousy although he had often strenuously denied that it entered into his considerations.

Pynton walked quickly, nervously, to the car park in the near distance where his limousine was awaiting him. His head was held down; the street lights played on his face as in mockery. Had Pynton heard the great news? What had he been proposing to Mauvine?

Stradde managed to pay his taxi-driver—twice as much as he was entitled to receive. The man's smile compensated for the doubting glances he had given his fare along the journey from the City.

"Wait in that park, if you like," said Stradde. "I shall not be more than an hour."

It was a moment of mental stability.

He experienced yet another. It was when he was walking up the steps to the door. He shifted from his hip pocket to his overcoat pocket the revolver he had taken from his desk drawer a few minutes before leaving the office. Mauvine wouldn't think of looking for a weapon: the coat would be hung in the hall while he was in the house!

Mauvine brushed etiquette and the footman aside. She came quickly into the hall the moment he entered. Never had she looked her full magnificence so assuredly as now, but he didn't see anything save the bloodless Pynton staring over her shoulder—or the ghost of the man.

"Michael!"

She caught hold of his right arm, flashed a signal to the footman, and led the broken millionaire into the

drawing-room. There, she locked the door. There was only one light burning—a crimson-shaded light. She forced him back to the divan on which they had dreamed so many dreams. She knelt at his feet so that she could look into his eyes.

"Michael!"

"Mauvine!"

"I've heard the news."

"Yes, I thought you would. Bleeker's dead."

"I know."

He stared at her as she knelt there, scrutinizing his face.

"You can guess why I've come, Mauvine?"

"Yes. You want money."

"God bless you, wonderful woman! How my poor brain stings. You've heard everything, Mauvine?"

"Guessed it."

"Penniless! That's what I am."

"Poor Michael!"

"The banks! The *bloody* banks, as usual!"

"They wouldn't help, Michael?"

"Not they? Who cares? . . . Poor Bleeker, Mauvine! Did it while I was in my room. Jumped from the window. . . ."

"Don't horrify me any more, Michael."

"Tied a rope around his neck and jumped."

"For God's sake, Michael, let's pull ourselves together and think hard."

"Bump! Bump! Bump! That was his body banging against the wall of the offices."

"Oh, Michael! You look at me so wildly!"

"Don't know where Hamshaw is. Damn him! He's cleared out and left me to face the fun."

She clung to his knees; her face was wet with tears.

"What are we going to do, Big Man!"

He pressed his hands to her cheeks and looked into her eyes.

"We're going to do what we have always said we

would do. We are going abroad, Mauvine. You and I. The firm is finished. We shall go to some small place abroad and live in happiness. Forget everything. Hector wouldn't help."

"No, I feared that."

"You've never met Hector ?"

"Only once, dear man. Don't let's talk about him. We have to think of so many things and there's so little time in which to do it. . . . Will they try to take you from me, Michael ?"

"They can't, if we get away."

He began to laugh uncannily. She saw the red streak in his eyes and feared it.

He snatched at the silver ornament in her hair—it was set with diamonds and rubies. He flung the thing across the room and laughed again.

She got to her feet, stepped quickly across the room, and poured him out a stiff brandy. He gulped it down. It was the first time, for thirty years, that he had taken an intoxicant. She ought to have remembered that, but her brain was becoming as bemused almost as his. . . .

"Poor old Bleeker !"

"Yes, Michael. Forget it."

"Bump ! Bump ! Bump ! And the pigeons screaming at him in derision."

"They shall not scream at you, *Chief* !"

"Listen to me, dear one !"

"I'm listening, Michael."

"Let's get away without delay. The dam' newspapers will be full of this to-morrow and the Public Prosecutor will get busy."

"How ? How can we get away ?"

"You will come with me, Mauvine ?"

"To the far ends of the earth, dear man. Haven't I believed in you for years and years ?"

"Right. Let me have five thousand in cash. Must be in cash, old girl !"

"Five . . . five what?"

"Thousand!" He stiffened his shoulders, he stared at her as though he were getting ready to accuse her of unfaithfulness.

Her eyes were streaming tears now. She caught at his hands and held them tightly.

"Michael, I haven't five hundred pounds."

He screamed out his words in reply to that.

"You haven't five—what?"

"Hundred," she repeated.

"Hell! Even you . . . !"

"What, Michael?"

"Know that I've got my back to the wall."

"I'd die for you."

"Really!" The maddened brain infused tremendous contempt into that word.

"Let me explain?"

"Not now." He stared about the room. Then: "I saw Pynton leave the house just now. What was he doing here? What the *hell* was he doing here?"

"He came to tell me about you," she confessed.

So that was it! He laughed insanely. The vultures dashing in before the stricken camel had breathed its last.

"What's Pynton to you, Mauvine?"

"No more than a friend, Michael. Don't speak so harshly of him: he may help us yet."

"Help me? Who wants help from him? You must help me. Come! You must have had sixty thousand from me in the last six years. That was pretty generous of me, Mauvine. Eh? Say so?"

"You have always been more than generous, Michael."

"Very well. Let me have five thousand in cash so that I may get out of the country. Then you shall join me when things have settled down. . . . You know?"

"Michael!"—she was clinging to him now with all her strength as though she feared his wrath would explode and overwhelm her—"do try to listen to me.

Your poor brain is confused, I know, but you must try to understand."

"Five thousand!"

"I haven't five hundred."

"The damned jewels in your hair would fetch more than that."

"Paste, Michael—paste."

"What? I gave three thousand for that single stone——"

"You may have done, dear man, but *that* stone is in the hands of the 'lenders!"

"The Jews!"

"Yes. All my jewels are with them. They went long ago."

"This house?"

"Mortgaged to the last penny."

"Furniture? I bought it."

"Gone with the rest. All held as security."

"What did you want with the money. Why did you wish to raise money?"

And she answered him in one word:

"*Silver!*"

"Oh!" he said, and dropped into silence. He understood, or thought he did. His humming brain stopped its humming. His hands let go their grip of her hands. His eyes stared into hers and searched for enlightenment. It came. He had always preached to her the value of silver holdings, had always urged on her his views that silver would one day rise to amazing figures. She had done no more than act on his advice. She had bought at every conceivable opportunity.

She was still on her knees before him; now she leaned back, keeping the tips of her fingers on his knees, and her beautiful face was eloquent of the awful agony of her very soul. She was suffering torture because she could not help him in his terrible dilemma. She hadn't five hundred pounds that she might give to him so that he could escape the hideous menace

by which he was threatened. He realized all this and a great wave of gratitude swept over him—swept over and left him dry and parched again. The fever returned with greater intensity. Jealousy flung its weight into the battle by the side of desperation.

"Tell me, and don't lie. What was Pynton doing here to-night?" He leaned forward and held her arms so tightly that she wished to scream out in pain. "You have never lied to me, Mauvine. I shall never be able to say that of you. You never did lie to me. What was he doing here?"

She braced herself and would have got to her feet, but his grip on her wrists was so terrible that she sank back, exhausted, on her knees.

"He wanted to take me away. That's the truth, Michael."

"Of course it's the truth. I said you wouldn't dare lie. He's in love with you?"

"He has always admired me, Michael, but I have been faithful to you."

He laughed in her face—in her tear-stained face. There was a joyous thrill to be derived from holding her at his mercy. He meant to kill her presently, but not yet. The sadistic strain that had been developed by the madness brought on through his financial failure, was demanding her life. How beautiful a thing to kill, he thought. Pynton! He wished that Pynton were near to see the killing. That would add to the glorious frenzy of it all.

"You were planning to slip away and leave me to face the music by myself. Was that it, Mauvine? You beautiful she-devil!"

She bit her lips to stifle the agonizing pain that shot through her body as he gripped her arms. She smiled—forced a smile through the tears that blurred her vision.

"There is only one man in all the world that I love, Michael," she said. "You know that. *You!*"

"Would you come away with me now?" He leaned forward to hear her answer. His breath heated her face—the face that was already hot beyond endurance.

"Yes, Michael, if it would not encumber you."

"Pynton wanted you to go with him?"

"Yes, but I denied him, Michael. Believe that."

"You denied him—what?"

"Everything, Michael."

He was silent, again, for a spell. But he didn't relinquish his grasp of her arms. Then:

"I have always worshipped you, Mauvine."

"You have, Michael."

"My beautiful goddess!"

"Your goddess, Michael?"

"My silver goddess!"

"Body and soul I have always been ready to yield up to you. Say that you know that, Michael?"

"No, my wonder-woman, that's not true. I have always yielded up my soul to you—La Lune! Symbol of silver!" His eyes blazed with a new fire—a white, maniacal fire that burned through her. "And in the end you played me false!"

She made a great effort to get to her feet. In spite of the physical pain he had visited on her, she was full of compassion for him. He had fallen! The great god she had believed him to be was crumpling in dust about her. Yet she loved him with all her heart and soul. How could he speak of Pynton as a rival? Pynton was no more than a pitiable piece of humanity, lacking personality, lacking every attribute she would have in a man. Pynton had pleaded with her—had pleaded on his knees—for just one hour! She had denied him, not with scorn, but with pity in her glorious eyes. There was only one man in all the world that was worthy of her body. That man was now facing her, with the light of insanity in his eyes.

"I have never been false to you, Michael. I am true to you now. Try me! Try me!" Her own eyes lit

up with a wild resolve. "Michael, if this is the end of life, take me *now*."

He flung up his head to listen to that damnable sound that would never be beaten out of his brain. He held up a finger to compel silence. He whispered:

"There's Bleeker again. Listen! Bump! Bump! Bump! He'll bump like that in his coffin! Hector said he would make his coffin of silver! And mine! And Hamshaw's."

She exerted all her will-power. If only she could get him to lie down and sleep for an hour it might quieten his nerves sufficiently for him to approach his mighty task with something like his old strength. He mustn't give way to this madness. She mustn't let him give way. Her work was to restore rationalism as far as it lay in her power.

"Michael! Come upstairs with me and lie down for an hour."

"Trying to trap me—are you?" he asked, and his brows lowered fearfully.

"I can't let you go out of the house in your condition of mind. Come into the quiet of my room, dear man, and I will mix you a sedative—something to bring calm to your poor mind."

He laughed in mockery.

"Bring me five thousand in cash," he said. "That's the help I want."

And again his expression changed. He was on his feet now and he had let go his hold on her arms. He reached out and grasped them again. He smiled, almost benignly, and drew her towards him. He shifted his hold of her so that his arms encircled her sylph-like body. He tightened his grip until it seemed to her that her veins would burst under the pressure.

"Yes, Mauvine," he said, "take me to your room. There we can think calmly of what is best to do."

She believed that she had overcome the storm that raged in his brain.

"Great Chief!" she said, and would have set her lips on his if he had not thrown back his head.

"Don't let's waste time," he said. "Come, Mauvine! If this is the end of all things, let's make the most of them, as you said. I loved you for that."

"Dear, dear man!"

She believed—still believed that she had won him from his madness.

To himself he was saying:

"Up there, in the silence of her room, it will be so easy to kill her. All these years she has enslaved me. I have given up everything for her. I despised the wife I wooed. I threw Hector out of my life. I killed Bleeker and ruined Hamshaw. All for this woman—this silver goddess with the soft, melting body and the eyes of a Madonna."

She slipped a hand under his arm. She was elated, amazed by the triumph she had achieved. He walked by her side to the door of the drawing-room. There was no suggestion of suspicion in his eyes. She glanced at him again and again, and said, encouragingly: "You couldn't do without me any more than I could do without you. Isn't that so, dear Michael?"

"That is so," he said, and he was watching for sign of servant.

Up the stairs she urged him. One servant saw them climb the stairs together, but he only smiled significantly: he had heard Lord Pynton plead for the privilege of going up those same stairs with her.

They reached the bedroom—that wonderfully furnished Tudor bedroom. Once inside, she turned the key in the lock. He marked the action, opened wide his eyes in suspicion. She laughed at his fears.

"You are with me," she said.

He nodded. He hadn't heard her words because of the roar and rush in his brain—the boom and swish of waves beating themselves in frenzy on the broken

coast. Yet, outwardly, he was wonderfully calm. He was bringing himself to *act*.

In the new ecstasy that was upon her she behaved like a girl—an abandoned siren. She pulled him around so that he faced her. She began to unfasten his necktie and collar. She called to him: "Dear man! Dear man! You are with me!" She made a movement as though she would disrobe.

He reached up and grasped her by the wrists. He said to her fiercely, yet without raising his voice above a whisper:

"I can't wait! Not for that! Do you hear? I can't."

"That's how I should have wished it," she whispered back. "Give me the primitive man I've dreamed of all these years. . . . Michael! Take me!"

He picked her up in his arms so easily that she might have been the snow-white perfumed pillow. He flung her down on the bed. She cried out in ecstasy:

"Michael!" Her eyes closed in a half-swoon.

He leaned over her. The light of insanity had returned to his eyes. Why didn't she open hers and see the satyr that stared at her.

He set his two hands near the opening of the silver sheath that covered her. He wrenched! The silk fell away with a peculiar little murmur of surrender.

She didn't open her eyes. She was joying in the belief that he had surrendered to her.

Now her bosom lay bare before his gaze. The two silver hillocks, whose summits were tipped with the rose of coral, invited him to clasp.

He set his fevered palms against them. He lowered his head and set his burning lips on them. Now had the moment come—the moment when he would free himself of the chains that had bound him all these years.

Her eyes were still closed. Her lips were parted in a smile of utter wantonness.

Another wrench! The silver sheath parted still more. He took his hands and set them against the

gleaming sides of her silver body. He lowered his head again and sank his face into the hollow of her yielding form.

And the very beauty of her—the magical beauty—restored the semblance of sanity to the unbalanced brain.

He couldn't kill that which he had loved so long!

He was still the slave!

He cried out to her loudly, brokenly:

"I can't do it, Mauvine! I can't kill you!" And with that, he leaped towards the door, turned the key in the lock and was gone—gone out of the house before she could bring herself to believe that he had left her.

She made no attempt to leave the bed. Her brain, too, seemed to be given a new strength as she lay there. She stared at strange visions that showed themselves on the canopy above her. He was gone! She loved him. He had thought of killing her, but he couldn't kill the thing he loved. He had always loved her in his own way. It was the way of the slave that tries to mask its serfdom with mastery. He must get out of the country: Lord Pynton had told her as much. Pynton knew. He was a shrewd, calculating man, Pynton. He was the type that goes almost to the end of life looking for the one woman who may make him human. Pynton had warned her that unless Stradde got out of the country he might have to face many charges—criminal charges. He mentioned Dartmoor in a casual sort of way. He had said:

"Mauvine, you beautiful creature! Am I not worth many Straddes to you?"

She had told him to go.

"Send for me when you have changed your mind," he had said.

Slowly her hands travelled down her exposed body. They touched her silver limbs, her breasts, with pathetic resignation. Five thousand pounds! Poor Michael!

She turned on her side and reached for the silver

ornamented telephone on the bedside table. She called faintly and sighed when the connection was made. Her bosom was heaving in pity—pity for Stradde. The white light, set in the canopy of the bed, never gleamed so white as it spread itself over her alluring form. She spoke softly:

"Pynton! It is Mauvine! Come to me—now! *I want you!*"

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

MICHAEL STRADDE, the millionaire of a little while before, sat on a public bench on the Thames Embankment. There was a tramp on either side of him: they had sunk down, just as he had, dead tired and indifferent to law and order.

The two tramps were in rags; their boots were broken at the toes; their elbows, bare and dirty, jutted out from the openings in the sleeves of the coats. The two men smelled of dust and sweat and yesterday's rain. The stubble on their chin was grey and wet with saliva that had trickled down from their pendulous lips.

Nobody could have said how Stradde found his way there. Nobody who had known him in the immediate past would have recognized him as he sprawled there. Just behind him rose the magnificent block of buildings that was known as a great London hotel to half the civilized population of the world. Not once, but a thousand times, Stradde had dined in that hotel and played the host to giants in commerce. Now he was sitting on a public bench, facing the River Thames. His mind was almost a blank.

He couldn't have said how he found his way from the Hampstead house. He had walked—all the way—just kept on walking. Nobody had taken any notice of him.

Already he had forgotten Mauvine. Only one cell in his brain was working, and it insisted that he should go on listening to the thunder of Bleeker's body against the wall and the scream of frightened and angry pigeons who resented the *thing* that was hanging between them and their ledges.

Stradde was weak, physically. He lurched as he sat. The tramp on his left said, gruffly :

" 'Ave any grub, ter-dye ?"

"Yes," said Stradde, mechanically, as he stared at the river—the dark, inviting river.

"Then lie on it," said the tramp, "an' tyke yer bloody 'ead off me shoulder."

Stradde made an effort and straightened himself in his seat. For him there was nothing incongruous in the tramp's admonishment. He who had bullied slaves all his life found a sort of companionship in the dishevelled bully by his side.

The man on his right—about his own build, and even more shabbily dressed than the tramp on the left—nudged Stradde in the ribs.

"Don't take any notice of that rat," he said. The voice was comparatively cultured : the sound of it awakened another dormant cell in the brain of Stradde. "I suppose you're down and out like me, but do as I do—match your brains against theirs. They can hit hard with their fists, but you can hit harder with your tongue if you know how. . . . That's a decent suit you've got on ! And boots ! You haven't been on the road long. What ?"

"No," said Stradde, sleepily.

A patrolling policeman came along. He halted in front of the bench.

"Now you bums," he said, not unkindly, "what about a move ?"

The tramp on Stradde's left opened one eye.

"Go to hell," he said to the policeman.

The policeman laughed indulgently. He flashed his lantern's light in the face of the tramp.

"What's that, Peter the Pug ?" he asked. "I know you."

The tramp on Stradde's right said :

"Give us ten minutes, *officer*. It's been a hard road to travel to-day."

"Come off it," said the policeman. "You'll be telling me you're one of the Stradde victims next. . . . All right! I'll give you just ten minutes." He walked away.

The semi-cultured voice said to Stradde:

"They've got a heart—these fellows in the Force. They know when you're down and out. Funny he should have mentioned Stradde—wasn't it? You saw the papers to-day, I suppose? There was a lot of truth in what he said to me—that policeman."

Stradde mumbled something that was utterly unintelligible.

"What your trouble?" the tramp asked sympathetically, adding: "Drink, I suppose?"

"Silver," said Stradde, without knowing why he said it.

"Hell!" said the man. "That's my trouble. I used to be in the City."

The tramp on the left growled cynically:

"For the love of Gawd, put a bloody sock in it and lemme getta sleep."

"Yes," the other tramp went on, musingly, and appearing to ignore the interjection, "there was a time when I ran a few horses and kept a fine establishment." He sighed. "*Autres temps, autres moeurs*," he said.

The tramp on the left yawned.

The man who had been in the City and had run a few horses in his time, leaned over Stradde and shouted to the scoffer:

"Hi! Dog's-body! Another word from you and there's a chop on the bloody chin coming to you. Get that?"

The drowsy tramp said: "A'right, Cocky." He began to snore again.

"You've got to come down to their level," said Stradde's neighbour. "Must bluff 'em. . . . Yes, I was in silver, but the bottom's knocked out of the

market to-day. Wonder if you ever had any dealings with the firm that went smash to-day? Stradde, Bleeker and whatshisname? They killed me two years ago. The swine, Stradde, wouldn't let me up. 'All right,' I said to him in his office, 'you may be a millionaire to-day, but your time's coming, and I hope that I'll meet you out in the wilderness. I'll make you thirsty! I'll steal the dam' sweat from your face so's you shall not moisten your hands even.' Funny? Eh? . . . Nice boots you've got on, mate? Pinch 'em?"

Stradde didn't reply. He wasn't listening.

"You know you look pretty bad, old thing," said the tramp. "You ought to try to get into a hospital."

"Why?" said Stradde, dully.

"Get a rest, if nothing else," said the man.

Why did he bend down and examine Stradde's feet—measure them, as it were?

Stradde was taken with a fleeting fancy that here was the undertaker come to measure him for that coffin of silver. The fancy passed. He fell asleep.

The thing was done with incredible swiftness! The "cultured" tramp exchanged his broken shoes for Stradde's. He took Stradde's hat and coat and left his own. And he left the revolver! It was too dangerous a possession. Poverty had made him quick in his movements when opportunity presented itself.

Dawn was breaking when Stradde was hustled on by a policeman. He wandered along the Embankment and passed into Temple Gardens. There he could sleep all day on a bench if he so wished. No one would have been likely to recognize him. He was a tramp—down and out and beaten to the world. And he didn't care what passers-by might think of him. He hadn't a penny in his pockets, but he still had the key of the offices! That one little cell in the brain that had kept its balance reminded him that he still had that key. He could let himself in long after the office staff had

departed for the day. He wondered what was happening in the City.

The day wore on.

He hadn't eaten for more than twelve hours, but he experienced no pangs of hunger. In his rags, transferred to him by a victim of his own machinations, he wandered about the streets of London all day. Towards dusk he was sitting on the steps of the National Art Gallery; there were other tramps beside him. He watched the pigeons and the sparrows congregate on the ledges of the façade: they chippered to each other, nudged each other, urged each other to get to sleep.

It was not later than eight o'clock in the evening when instinct compelled him to make his way to the old City offices.

In the Strand he passed two men whom he had lunched and dined extravagantly less than a month before: they didn't recognize him in his rags. After he passed them he looked down, not at his shabby coat and broken boots, but at his hands; they were dirty and the finger-nails were fringed with grime.

The respite since his hour of madness with Mauvine had somewhat steadied his nerves. He became almost rational when he reached the City of London where the business-men of the world conduct their business—including that of silver.

He took to himself a new lease of strength; he found the key of the offices in his trousers' pocket—even the tramp who had exchanged clothes with him—the tramp who had been ruined on the silver market—had replaced what he found in the pockets.

He got to the offices where had been conducted a business that stood for all that was great and reputable in the world of commerce.

He was not to know that for that one day the staff had been dismissed: they were to await a summons before they resumed their several tasks.

The vestibule door was open: he walked up the

stairs and let himself into the offices. How dark and forbidding they were! The empty desks! The silence! No sound of typewriters or hurrying feet! Nobody waiting at the counters to see Mr. Hamshaw or Mr. Bleeker or plead for an interview with Mr. Stradde! Even in his madness he stopped to stare at a lead pencil lying on an open ledger. Why hadn't that clerk closed the ledger before he left the office for the day?

He got to his private room. Out of habit he touched the bell to summon Grymdyke, his confidential secretary. The instant after doing so, he realized that Grymdyke wasn't there: he had left him—he had scuttled with all the other rats from the sinking ship.

He sat down at the old desk from which he had directed operations representing millions of pounds. He had loved that desk—it belonged to his great-great grandfather, the man who had taken the trade with China in his hands and turned it into a fabulous market.

How silent it was in that room! Yet he could still hear the bumping of Bleeker's body against the wall outside!

He rested his elbows on the old, oaken desk and stared at nothing. He shut his eyes and his brain began to meander over every phase of the firm's business in its prosperous days. He, who had never been outside of England, could see the weather-scarred faces of the captains who came back from their voyages to report. Big, hearty fellows! What a pity it was that he and Mauvine hadn't taken a trip with one of them—to see the world before their life was ended!

Very dark outside. Another cell in the maddened brain bestirred itself. He switched on one light, his chin was resting in his cupped hands; his brain began to race again. He thought of Mauvine. He said to himself that he had given her all he had to give, but when he asked for five thousand with which to save himself from utter debasement she had confessed to him that

she hadn't any money. What had she done with it?

He wished that Bleeker could go to his death without making all that fuss about it.

Bump! Bump!

When he met Bleeker again he would ask him why he kept on reminding him that he had reduced the firm to ashes.

He wished that Grymdyke would come to see him for the last time. He pressed the bell button; he waited. No response! Where *was* Grymdyke?

He looked at the window: for the first time he realized that on that floor there were blinds to the windows and that they were drawn. Why had they chosen to draw the blinds on *his* floor? Did they expect a funeral?

He drew the revolver—the one that Grymdyke examined long ago. Very carefully—with gruesome carefulness—he loaded it in all six chambers. He placed the weapon on the desk in front of him and regarded it intently. He began to smile at it. There—there!—in that tiny thing of steel was the escape from all the howling of the City outside. The newspapers might shriek as loudly as they could; he wouldn't hear them, nor read them, and their shrieking wouldn't hurt him in the slightest.

With all the inquisitiveness of a young monkey when it comes on something strange, he leaned forward and touched the trigger with a forefinger—touched it very lightly, then sat back and fell again to thinking of a thousand phases of the business that had brought about the chaos. There had been a time when he might have sold at a profit—a rise of a few points. He would have made a tremendous fortune, even then, for his holdings were so heavy. But he wanted all or nothing. His was the spirit of the gambler who really matters in this adventurous world. Bleeker and Hamshaw would have been beside themselves with joy if he had made

that fortune for them to share. They had always been fair weather friends: they couldn't withstand the dark clouds of doubt. . . .

It was difficult to believe that Mauvine had so changed her attitude towards him that she wouldn't lend him even five thousand with which to get abroad. Think of the vast sums he had lavished on her! Would the woman in the Grosvenor Crescent house have shown similar ingratitude?

He got up from the chair and crossed to the small table on which was standing the soda-water siphon. He pressed the lever: the siphon was empty. He laughed harshly as he went back to his chair. Once upon a time, Grymdyke would have renounced his Faith if that siphon had failed the Chief.

He reached again for the revolver and began to balance it on the palm of his hand as though he were calculating its weight. Again he noticed the filthy condition of his hands. He dropped the revolver once more and went to the marble wash-basin on the other side of the room. The water had been cut off! There was dust in the basin. How long ago was it that the crash happened? The staff must have left the place years ago!

Another turn of the brain, and he was crouching back in his chair, watching the locked door—watching fearfully as though he expected someone to enter and spring upon him.

It would be Bleeker, of course. He couldn't get Bleeker out of his mind. All the other victims of his insensate folly didn't stay in his thoughts a second—they came and went. Bleeker was different: all through the years he had known the man: he had been afraid to express himself with anything like conviction. He had waited till after death so that he could assert his sense of independence and vindictiveness.

Would he meet Bleeker again? How would he hold his head—the head he had seen so weirdly bent

over on the shoulder as the body hung suspended from the window?

There was deep, impressive silence in the square at the back of the offices—the square on which the windows of that room looked out.

Then came that awful tap! tap! tap! at the pane!

Stradde clutched the revolver and shifted his frenzied gaze from the door to the window.

Damn the man! Couldn't Bleeker wait a few moments until the courage came to pull that trigger?

The brain swung again. The torture of suspense was burning holes in his very heart.

Tap! Tap! Tap!

He shouted angrily:

"All right, Bleeker, keep your head! Silver's bound to rise. You shall have all the money you want for your damned shipping department if only you will give me time to think! Don't keep tapping at the window. I'm going to make millions for you if the market rises twelve points."

There came a footstep on the office stair! A strangely light step! It reached the corridor outside the private room.

Stradde raised the revolver towards his temple.

That soft footfall sent his frenzied brain into greater frenzy. This would be the police coming to arrest him! The sensational fall of the greatest firm of merchants in the City was to be followed by that other and inevitable thrill, the arrest of the principal in the firm. He could see himself being helped into a waiting car to be driven to prison, there to await his trial. He could see himself standing in the dock. The newspaper reporters were sitting there, writing feverishly as the judge sentenced him to penal servitude after preaching a homily on the ethics of business. Yesterday, that same judge might have been glad to accept his hospitality as a host.

Silence again! Where was Mauvine, now? In the

arms of Lord Pynton, of course. She had fooled him. The newspapers would tell the whole of the story after his death: they would make light of his amours and pretend to draw a moral from them. The salacious pen would sketch a pretty story of secret sin in a Hampstead house.

But he had killed Mauvine—hadn't he? In that Tudor bedroom! He shook his bull head after the manner of a retriever shaking itself after leaving the water. It was his intention to strangle her. He remembered, now, that——

The footsteps in the corridor were louder now. It was the executioner coming with his two assistants, a dangling rope held behind his back.

Someone knocked at the door! Stradde had the revolver in his hand: they should not arrest him: they could not tumble a silver god from his throne so easily as that.

A voice: "Sir?"

"Go away!" he shouted back.

"A letter, sir!"

Something was slid under the door. Footsteps retreated gently.

Tom Slater, the outdoor messenger, had taken that letter from Mauvine: she was waiting in a taxi: she had failed to find courage that would take her up the stairs. Tom Slater had returned to feed his pigeons which he had forgotten that day because of all the trouble that had fallen on the house of business. He had met Mauvine, recognized her, asked how he might be of service: she was almost certain that Stradde was in his room she had said.

Stradde picked up the letter, but he didn't break the heavy seal. He recognized her handwriting in spite of the turmoil that was going on in his brain. He laughed bitterly as he went back to his chair. This would be a letter in which she would treat him with disdain, or tell him that she was going away with Pynton.

Then he *couldn't* have killed her? He crushed the letter in his left hand: the revolver was in his right.

Tap! Tap! Tap!

It was only the hungry pigeons: they had marked the light in the window and were insisting on being fed. To the tortured mind it was Bleeker summoning him. He was calling: "Come on, Stradde! It's the only way out!"

He pressed the muzzle of the revolver to his temple and pulled the trigger.

His head fell forward on the desk—rested on the crooked left arm. The red drops from the temple trickled over the crumpled letter. The letter that contained the five thousand in bank-notes for which Mauvine had sold herself to Lord Pynton in order that Stradde might flee the country.

The tapping at the window ceased.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

THE Coroner said to Hamshaw:

"You may be seated while you give your evidence, Mr. Hamshaw. We can understand that you have passed through a dreadful ordeal."

The imaginative reporter might have seen the ghosts of Stradde and Bleeker looking through the window—he might have heard them sigh in resignation, and seen them slinking back to their grave.

Hamshaw was dressed in black; there was mourning in his eyes, in his dejected mien. He sat down on the chair pushed into position by the Coroner's officer.

"Give your evidence in your own words," said the Coroner, sweetly. Then he frowned at the police officer near the chair. "Give Mr. Hamshaw a glass of water," he said.

The imaginative reporter would have seen the ghosts come back to chuckle as Hamshaw raised the glass to his lips.

"You found the body of the deceased, Michael Stradde, in his room?" said the Coroner.

Hamshaw nodded and passed a hand over his eyes to shut out the vision.

"Time?"

"It was about four-thirty in the morning," said Hamshaw.

"Did you often go to the office at that time in the morning!"

"No," said Hamshaw. "After our last Board meeting I rushed to the North to meet certain financial friends who might be persuaded to come to the firm's rescue. Mr. Stradde had painted so black a picture of our affairs that I realized something must be done quickly.

I returned to town about two o'clock in the morning and went to the office to search for certain papers that might reassure those who were disposed to help in the crisis."

The ghosts at the window knew the truth. They nudged each other and went away again. They knew that after the fateful Board meeting Hamshaw raced down to his Surrey house and discussed the situation with his wife. They arranged for the transfer of her jewels to a safer sanctuary. They talked of the settlements he had made on her. She might be fluffy-brained, but she was as keen as a razor's edge when her personal interests were threatened.

"If we are in the soup," he had said, "everything we possess will have to be sacrificed—thrown into the common pool."

"I sacrifice nothing," she had retorted. "Why should I be victimized because I happened to marry a fool of a husband who couldn't see through Stradde from the very beginning?"

"What am I to do?" he had asked.

"Stay here," she had said. "I'll see to it that you are away if the newspaper people call."

"Even the police may call," he had said, fearfully.

She had laughed at that.

"Stradde himself has called before now," was the reply, "and I think I fooled him. Stay here!" He stayed.

The Coroner asked, so gently that he might have been questioning an affronted angel:

"The affairs of the firm were in a serious condition? The deceased hadn't the courage to face the troubles that menaced?"

"On the contrary," said Hamshaw, "I found—have since found that they were not so serious as he imagined. I realize now that he allowed himself to be stampeded."

"The firm was not in jeopardy?"

"Far from it," said Hamshaw. "There were difficulties to be circumvented, and if he had kept his head for a little while longer he would have seen that everything was bound to come out all right."

"*May* I ask you to be a little more explicit?" said the Coroner. "I don't want you to divulge all the secrets of a great trading concern like this, but there are certain matters on which the public demand enlightenment."

"Very well," said Hamshaw. "Since the death of my revered chief partner, another firm has come to the rescue, as we may call it, and offered to place at our disposal all the money that may be required to tide over the—the crisis. Little may be required."

"And the name of that firm?"

"Gonzolas Brothers," said Hamshaw, adding softly: "The firm that used to be known as Gonzolas. Already the banks have been satisfied."

It was true. The truth rings through any court of justice when a lie whimpers like a wet wind.

"Now, come to the finding of the body, Mr. Hamshaw. . . . Officer!" The policeman tendered another glass of water. Hamshaw sipped, wiped his lips with a handkerchief, rested his elbows on his knees, clasped his hands, and stared at the floor.

"I found him sitting in his chair," he said. "He was crumpled up, as it were."

"The revolver?"

"Had fallen on the floor."

"Any letter?"

The reporters looked up sharply.

"Yes, there was a letter in his hand," said Hamshaw. "It was unopened."

The Coroner lifted a red-stained envelope from his desk and held it up so that the jurors might see it.

"I have the letter here," he said. "It was handed by the witness to the police. I will read it."

He read aloud:

"Have a little more courage, dear man. If my life is of any avail it is yours for the asking."

The Coroner said to Hamshaw:

"No signature, Mr. Hamshaw! Obviously the handwriting of a woman. Does it strike you as being strange that so short a note should have been placed in so large an envelope and heavily sealed?"

"I have no explanation to offer," said Hamshaw. "I was not privy to the personal affairs of the deceased."

No mention of the bank-notes that had been contained in the envelope!

In the drawing-room of a Hampstead house a white-lipped woman was awaiting the report of the inquest, and wondering what had become of those notes.

The inquest was closed. Stradde had taken his life in a moment of temporary insanity. The Coroner suggested to the jury that a rider might be added to their verdict—a tribute of sympathy to the bereaved.

The inquest on the body of Bleeker followed. It was a minor affair! Hamshaw was very sympathetic in his references to the ultra-sensitiveness of his partner. He wished that he could have talked to him immediately after the Board meeting, but circumstances had prevented his doing so.

. . . . .

In the private room that had been sacred to Michael Stradde, Hector Farrar, the nephew, sat in the chair that had been carefully *cleansed*. The members of the staff were working with the energy of bees: the chaos had been eliminated: new hope was demanding recognition.

He touched the bell. Grymdyke came in.

Grymdyke would be answering that ring a thousand years after he was dead. His face was expressionless. There was a writing-pad in his left hand, a pencil in his right. Ready to take orders! When the last trump

sounded, Grymdyke would remember that he was a perfect private secretary and reach for pad and pencil and be prepared hermetically to seal his lips after he had left the room of those whom he served.

"I will see Mr. Hamshaw now," said Hector.

Hamshaw came in. He was apprehensive. The broad-shouldered figure in the chair was eloquent of all that he feared—authority.

"You may *sit* down, Hamshaw."

"Thank you, Mr.——"

"Farrar!"

"Thank you, Mr. Farrar."

"Now let's look at things. We seem to have straightened them out."

"We have achieved wonders——"

"*I* have. Don't let's misunderstand each other, Hamshaw."

"You've seen the papers, Mr. Farrar, I suppose? There's every likelihood of silver being stabilized."

"I read the morning newspapers, Hamshaw, about two hours before you wake up in the morning. . . . How's the temper of the staff?"

"Excellent!"

"'Sir'."

"Excellent, sir."

"When silver is stabilized, Hamshaw, we ought to be able to re-establish trade with the Far East. See to it that all inquiries are put through to our agents out there. Don't let the grass grow under your feet. Reassure them—especially the banks. See that all credits are there. You understand?"

"Perfectly, sir."

"Tell me—did you see the woman, known as La Lune, at the funeral?"

"Yes," said Hamshaw, "but I didn't deem it the right moment to speak to her."

"Do you mean to say that she had the effrontery to take a place in the cortège?"

"No," said Hamshaw. "I saw her in the crowd—on the fringe of the crowd. As we, the *real* mourners, were leaving, I looked back and saw her kneeling by the side of the open grave." Hamshaw, to his credit, looked out of the office window: there was a peculiar glistening in his eyes.

"There's another matter I wish to have settled, Hamshaw," said Hector, brusquely. "Your evidence before the Coroner?"

"I feel that I did the right thing."

"You took the five thousand from the envelope? That was very discreet of you, Hamshaw."

"I have brought the notes from my safe, Mr. Farrar." He handed over a package which Hector didn't trouble to open in the other man's presence. He placed it in a drawer of the desk.

"There's a difficulty," said Hector. "That letter was given to a servant of the firm—Slater, the outdoor messenger. What about him?"

"I have already talked to Slater about it," said Hamshaw.

"Bribed him to keep his mouth shut?"

"In effect, sir."

"That was a piece of crass stupidity. That's the way to make blackmailers."

"He is a very loyal servant, sir."

"I know the meaning of loyalty as well as you do, Hamshaw. Send this man, Slater, to me, and say nothing about this letter. Stir up the staff, Hamshaw! Keep them at work. Don't let them discuss matters during office hours. Listen for any remark that breathes disloyalty and—and if you hear one, 'fire' the man, or woman, without waiting a second. Let me see this man Slater."

"Very good, sir," said Hamshaw.

He went out of the room. Hector's gaze followed him. He had said that he would make Hamshaw's coffin of silver—he might get greater satisfaction

out of making him a slave for the rest of his life.

Tom Slater, the outdoor messenger, came in. He grinned. His whimsical face held just the slightest suspicion of familiarity.

"Want to see me, Mr. Hector ?"

Hector gave him a look that pierced a hole right through his small, ruffled head.

"When next you come into my presence," said Hector, "keep in mind the fact that I am the head of this firm and that you are an outdoor messenger."

"Sorry, sir."

Beneath his breath, Slater said : "Gawd ! What's happened to him ?"

"Listen, Slater !"

"Sir ?"

"I understand that you took a letter from a lady and slipped it under the door—that door—there !"

And Tom Slater, remembering all that he had learned from the heroes of his beloved films, and living up to their principles, drew himself up with military preciseness and said :

"*What* letter, sir ? I don't know of *any* letter ? *What* lady ? *What* door ? S'elp me, sir."

"All right," said Hector. He got up from his chair and deliberately placed his hands on the little man's shoulders. "Slater," he said, and all the arrogance was gone from his voice, "let me tell you this : in most City offices there is a small man holding down a small job, yet that job may be as important as the Chief's."

"Thank you, sir. I understand."

"You understand nothing, Slater. Go back to your job."

Slater backed away. Hector returned to his desk.

Grymdyke's signal came on the buzzer. Hector said : "Well ?"

"There's a lady waiting to see you, sir," said Grymdyke.

"Name ?"

Grymdyke appeared to hesitate.

"Come here," said Hector peremptorily.

Grymdyke came into the room.

"It was my mistake, sir," he said. "It isn't often that I forget myself." He was plucking at his thin tooth-brush of a moustache. He was awaiting the fall of the sword on his head. Poor Grymdyke! It had always been thus-wise with him. Why, when Stradde used to ring him up from the Grosvenor Crescent house Grymdyke raised an imaginary hat as he listened on the phone and began: "Good afternoon, sir!"

"How did you forget yourself?" Hector asked.

"The lady asked for Mr. Hamshaw, sir, and I said, inadvertently, that Mr. Hamshaw was in conference with you. Then—then she said that she preferred to see you, sir."

"Name ?" It came like a shot.

"*The* lady, sir," said Grymdyke, and looked away.

La Lune! Mauvine! Hector understood.

"No, thanks, Grymdyke," he said, coldly. "I am much too busy to speak to callers to-day. Say that I'm—I'm sorry."

"Very good, sir." Grymdyke moved away.

"Stay!" Hector was moved by an impulse. "On second thoughts I will see her. I don't want any interruption.

"No, sir. Of course not, sir." Grymdyke withdrew.

She seemed to melt into the room. Grymdyke closed the door the instant after she was over the threshold. Many a time had Hector seen her photograph reproduced in the periodicals, but when he looked on the original he said to himself that they had not paid a fair tribute to her beauty. She was younger than he understood her to be. The eyes were larger and more compelling than the photographic blocks had made them. The lines of her face were cast in magical beauty: she would never be old: and her personality surged

out towards him like the first warm breeze of spring. She was dressed not in funereal garb, but in the brightest of colours, each one of which became her. There was a world of knowledge in her expression: she had read his mind before she crossed the narrow intervening space between the door and his desk. She did not hold out a hand in greeting as he half-expected her to do. The instant Grymdyke mentioned that she had dared to call at the office he surmised that she was coming as a pleader.

He spoke gently, courteously, in spite of all that was passing in his mind.

"Allow me, Madam!" He placed a chair in position for her. "It isn't often that we receive ladies in this office. Perhaps you will forgive any apparent lack of courtesy."

"It is the first time I have been in this office," said Mauvine. "Only a matter of great import to myself urged me to come to-day."

Hector had gone back to his chair. He rested an elbow on the arm-rest and scrutinized her face with his own chin resting in the cup of his palm.

"It concerns the late Mr. Stradde?" he said.

"Yes." She said it in a whisper. She looked around. "This was his room?"

Hector leaned forward slightly as he said:

"Madam, let us be quite frank with each other. Let us cut out anything in the nature of sentiment and come straight to the business in hand."

"Nothing could please me more," said Mauvine.

"I don't wish to be unduly harsh——"

"I am accustomed to harshness," she said, and smiled rather pathetically.

"I hope you will try to be indulgent to my mood," he said.

"I shall be gentle," she said, and smiled again. "Hard knocks have made me gentle—indulgent, tolerant of moods."

He bit on his nether lip. He didn't like her attitude.

"I shall ask you to remember that the relations that existed between you and Stradde are known to me——"

"Between Mr. *Michael* Stradde and myself!" She said it quietly, but he felt the point of the rapier slip through his guard and puncture his pride.

He replied feebly—feebly for him:

"Others who loved him are in mourning."

She glanced down at her raiment.

"How small a thing to alienate from a woman the courtesy of a gentleman," she said.

He didn't reply. To himself he said: "Theatrical!" Aloud: "What is the business that has brought you here?"

"That's better," she said, and sighed in relief. "I prefer that you regard me as a business caller. I read the newspaper reports of the inquest on Mr. Stradde. There was a reference to a letter that was found in his hand."

Hector nodded, stooped, and unlocked a drawer of his desk. He brought out the package that Hamshaw had transferred to his keeping.

"You have this in mind," he said. "Naturally, Mr. Hamshaw opened the letter. For the sake of avoiding a scandal he deemed it discreet to withhold the whole of the contents from the public."

"Naturally," said Mauvine. "It was what a gentleman would do."

He handed over the package, pausing to say: "Perhaps, you will give me a receipt for it." He corrected himself the instant after the words were out. "I beg your pardon," he said.

She accepted the package, and lowered her head so that he might not see that which was in her eyes.

"Will you open it to see that the amount is correct?" he asked.

She opened the package and slowly withdrew the

bundle of notes. The stain that was on them set her lips aquivering.

He got up from his chair and walked to the window so that he might not see the twitching of her face.

"Five thousand," he said over his shoulder. "I have counted the notes. I will be responsible for the accuracy of the amount."

He fancied that the window gave back a faint reflection of her touching the bundle with her lips before she placed it in her handbag. He was grateful for the strength of will that prevented his turning quickly and offering her his sympathy. Hang it, he thought, she was only a woman, after all.

"I'll take your word for it," she said, and her voice was even—beautifully collected.

He went back to his place near the desk.

"Does that end the interview, Madam?" he asked. "I am very busy this afternoon."

"Please give me a few more moments of your time," she said. "I am aware of all the changes that have taken place since the death of Mr. Stradde. You are now——"

"Head of the firm," he said.

She inclined her small head in acknowledgment.

"Forgive my seeming impertinence," she said, "but I believe that I'm right when I say you are a wealthy man?"

"Perhaps," he said, and frowned. He wondered: "Is this woman going to try her blandishments on me?"

She paused a long while before she could find the courage to ask:

"Would you be disposed to purchase my silver holdings?"

He drew himself up indignantly. She was trying to bluff him.

"What?" he said, sharply.

"I have so many—so many that I would like to get rid of," she said.

He sat down and gave her look for look. Then he spoke in that tone of voice which carries an accusation.

"You are reputed to be a wealthy woman," he said. What he meant to say, and what she understood him to say, was: "You are a damned lucky woman to have fooled Stradde into giving you so much money."

She answered him in a phrase that lingered in his mind for years:

"Some call it being lucky. Some call it sacrifice."

Again he beat down the sentimentalism that threatened.

"I'll think over your offer," he said. "The market is down to rock bottom. Come to see me at my private residence." He gave her the address of his Hyde Park house. An idea was sweeping through his mind.

She rose from her chair.

"Thank you," she said. "I know the market is low, but I also know that it will rise. Mr. Stradde was confident of it."

"I prefer not to discuss Mr. Stradde at this interview," he replied.

He accompanied her to the door. Grymdyke came to receive and conduct her along the corridor.

Hector went back to his desk and stared at the papers in front of him. The chair she had vacated looked up at him reproachfully.

He rang for Grymdyke.

"Mr. Hamshaw," he said, abruptly.

Hamshaw came in immediately.

"Well?" said Hector. "You know that she has been here?"

"Yes, sir," said Hamshaw, humbly. He looked away.

"Well?"

"I think I know what she came to see you about," said Hamshaw.

"Wanted to unload her silver holdings on us," said Hector, and laughed without feeling mirth.

"Exactly," said Hamshaw, and lapsed into silence.

"Had the damn' cheek to come here and try to fool me," said Hector.

Hamshaw nodded, obsequiously.

"That's what I said to Lord Pynton," he replied. "He has been here while you were engaged with her. He didn't know that she had called.

"Lord Pynton ?"

"He told me that she was practically destitute," said Hamshaw.

"Don't be a damned fool !" he almost shouted. "Good God ! She must have rooked Stradde of a mint of money."

"That's what I told Pynton, but he assured me that——"

"Where is it ?"

"I don't know." Hamshaw fancied he saw a chance to ingratiate himself. "Let us take her silver holdings," he said, and shook his head sapiently. "They're likely to rise six points to-morrow. We've just had word——"

"Shut up !" Hector's face was livid with rage. "That woman belongs to Yesterday ! And this firm has started afresh. And, what's more, we start *clean* !"

"I'm sorry," said Hamshaw, meekly.

"You lie," was the retort. "You're not sorry. You absorbed the damnable lesson that you and—and the others tried to force on me. Squeeze anybody, no matter whom they may be."

He rang the bell. Grymdyke came in.

"See if Lord Pynton is on the telephone," he said, "and put me through to him without delay."

"Very good, sir !" Grymdyke went out.

Hector looked at Hamshaw.

"Better leave this to me," he said.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

MRS. STRADDE and Felice were with Hector in his Hyde Park house. It was late afternoon: he had left the office early. During the morning he had dealt with a number of important messages from agents all over the world. He had received notable members of the House of Commons who sought his advice on the trend of world finance. The firm's principal agent in the Far East had asked for instructions that meant the investing of half a million immediately in spite of the current rumours of general chaos. He had handled all these matters with ease and with the clarity of vision that marks the man of genius. Yet *she* hadn't been out of his mind for a moment.

He regretted the attitude he had taken up towards her on the previous day. He wished he could take it back. He had said things that must have hurt: he would that he could draw them back as "boys, flying kites, draw in their white-winged birds".

He had contemned her in his heart because he believed her to be the paramour of Michael Stradde, and because he believed that a paramour can do no more than break a man's life. But there had been something in her eyes, in her beautiful restraint, in the courage she displayed when he would have openly flouted her, that compelled not only his admiration but his homage.

Felice came to him. All the beauty of an earlier day had been restored to her. Her youthfulness might have come with a second Dawning. The eyes were clear and full of a light that carries ambition over mountain tops. The mind was clear; it had been sweetened by the sympathy that had flowed from the heart of the other,

the elderly woman, who came into the room immediately behind her.

Soon, they were to be married—Hector and Felice. He asked no greater happiness, so he told himself.

The grey-haired woman who had sat in silence so long in that grim house in Grosvenor Crescent had caught a little of the youthfulness that was so apparent in the girl. The eyes had lost that look of yearning; her step was sprightly; her voice was quick and full of spirit. The man she had really loved was not dead; he lived again in this stalwart nephew who had shouldered the burden of a beaten firm.

"She is late," said Felice, and rested a hand in his. "Do you think that she means to come along! I can't believe it."

"Yes, I am certain that she will keep the appointment," he said. And he looked searchingly at his aunt.

The elderly woman shook her head.

"No," she said, with determination. "I couldn't possibly meet her."

"Very well," he said, and turned again to Felice.

"Surely, you understand that it is impossible," said Felice.

"I suppose it is," he said.

"My dear Hector"—from the elderly woman who had suffered—"you wouldn't expect it of me? I was his *wife*! You can't argue against that fact."

"No," he said and fell into silence.

"Got every penny she could get out of him," said the aunt. "Did she care about my feelings?"

"No, I suppose not," he said, mechanically.

"For thirty years and longer I sat in silence—in a desert. Did she disturb herself about that?"

"No, I suppose not," came the monotonous reiteration.

"Very well then, Hector. Felice and I will await you in the Chinese room."

"I will come to you the moment after she has left me," he said.

Mauvine came in a taxi. He watched her from the window as she alighted. He felt rather weak of resolution. He wished he had been able to settle this matter in the office on the previous afternoon. He heard the servant open the door. He waited apprehensively till she was announced.

As he went forward to receive her he knew instinctively that he was the weaker of the two.

She was simply dressed : he wondered if she had taken his somewhat caustic reference to her dress of the previous day in earnest.

"It is very wonderful of you to give me this appointment," she said as he showed her to a chair. "I was rather afraid that you would regret your offer and send me a message cancelling it. But you're not like that—are you ?"

He sat down, near her, but in such a position that he could mark every line of her face and its changing expressions.

"Frankly, I don't know why I made the appointment," he said, "but I felt yesterday that there were questions I would like to ask—questions that were so personal that the very fact of your being in an office would——"

"I understood that," she said, relieving him of much embarrassment.

"Let's come to business," he said. Oh, that parrot-like remark.

"About my silver holdings ? I am so anxious to get the matter settled."

He looked into her eyes for the sign of avarice that wasn't there.

"Do you know," he said, with boldness, "I can't believe that you are in need of money—that you must sell your silver holdings."

She smiled bravely and arched her eyebrows provokingly.

"Really ?" she said. "I am offering to sell at the market price. Is it customary for a prospective buyer to ask the reason for the sale ?"

"No," he said, promptly, "and I apologize."

"I need the money." It came with dramatic candour. "I need the money as quickly as I can get it."

Then he found the boldness to say :

"But you cannot possibly be in need of money. I gave you back five thousand in cash yesterday ; that money is sound enough."

She smiled through a suspicion of tears as she helped him out :

"Although it was stained," she said.

"We are talking business," he reminded her, but he was just as sentimental in that moment as she was.

"Exactly," she replied.

"Look here ! I don't want to buy your holdings at market price. It is down to thirteen pence an ounce, but I know that it will jump nine points in less than two months."

"I am selling," came her voice, very thin, yet very determined.

He shook his shoulders as though he were irritated by her persistence.

"I'll tell you something else," he said, "but I wouldn't tell anyone else. Silver will be stabilized within six months, and it will be stabilized at thirty pence. It is an international problem that has to be settled."

"He always said so," she replied, quietly. "I am still selling."

Was this woman fooling him ? He gazed intently at her thin, twitching face. There was poignant sorrow in every line ; there was nothing false to be found there although his eyes searched for it.

He crushed down the business phase of his character and allowed sentiment to have its way.

"I'll tell you what I'll do," he said. "I will buy your holdings at market price, but if the price rises during the

next six months I will pay the difference. That's as far as I can go.

"It is much farther than your business sense takes you," said Mauvine. "I thank you for it. I will consider the offer—consider whether or not I shall take advantage of it. At the moment I want five thousand pounds, and I haven't got it."

"I gave it to you in the office yesterday," he reminded her. Then he saw something trembling in her eyes and he looked away. "Sorry," he said, in a whisper. "There may be something I don't understand."

"There is," she said, "and perhaps I should be unfair to myself if I didn't tell you. I—I borrowed that five thousand in order to help him get out of the country."

He swung around instantly. He was on the verge of a confession.

"Borrowed it ?" he echoed.

Now was the moment, had she been a cocotte, a mercenary, when she could have played on the strings of his heart.

She infused the casualness of the indifferent into her voice : she smiled at his look of perplexity.

"How beautifully innocent you are," she said. "You don't appear to understand that we women live rather extravagantly."

"I do not," he said and frowned.

"To be blunt, then," she said, "I was without ready money, having mortgaged everything I could. He was in need, and—and——"

Those tears would not be denied ; they gushed from her eyes ; they raced down her cheeks, leaving pathetic little ruts in the rouge and powder. She tried to gulp down the sobs that were choking her ; her hands clutched at the handbag on her knee. Then, in a paroxysm of seeming anger, she cried out :

"Why do you question me about these matters ? They are no concern of yours. If you don't

wish to buy, say so, and I will go into the City, to-morrow."

It was then that great understanding was given him. With gallantry that was very near to the beautiful he went close to her, and he said :

"You need not tell me any more. I gather—have gathered—that you put every cent you possessed into silver at his bidding. You—you are very different from the woman I believed you to be."

"I know," she said, and smiled through her tears.

"And to-day you are left with nothing ?"

"I am not complaining."

"No," he said, "but I can read your mind. I will take these holdings, as I have said ; I will let you have the cash you desire to-morrow ; I will pay the difference, as I told you, if the market rises. But—but what are your intentions now ? What are you going to do ?"

She shrugged her expressive shoulders.

"Who shall say ?" she replied.

"The finest thing I can recommend," he said, "would be a sea trip. We have a ship going out to the Pacific next week, I can arrange that you shall have a comfortable berth and a rest that will do you all the good in the world."

She rose from her chair and held out her hand.

"You've been wonderfully good to me," she said. "I didn't expect the half."

"You will take the trip ?"

"No, but thank you all the same."

He nodded.

"I'll fix the other matter up for you to-morrow morning. I have your address. I will see that everything is carried through without a hitch."

"Thank you." She was smiling again.

He turned away from her so that she might not mark the emotion that had taken hold of him.

"I'm not all cast iron," he said, still keeping his eyes

averted. "I set out to kill Michael Stradde because of all that he did to those I loved, but I can understand your position. This must have been a great blow to you. But—but why should I pity you? You must have known that he couldn't marry you while his wife was alive and not divorced from him?"

The tears were blinding her, but she tried to hide the fact from him by turning her back to him.

"I knew it," she said in a courageous tone of voice, "but what does that matter?"

He said, very softly, very tenderly, very sympathetically:

"I dare say you'll be pretty lonely now that he's gone?"

That seemed to give her the strength of which she stood sorely in need.

"Oh, I don't know," she said. "Not exactly lonely. There are so many women like myself; we belong to a tribe of which other women—married women—smugly married women—have never heard. We obey an impulse to help a man with all the power we have." She halted. "If he wins, his wife gets the credit; if he loses, we get the blame."

Silence. It was Mauvine who relieved the tension.

"Oh, why are we talking like this?" she asked, almost fiercely. "I'll wait until you've put this business through; then I'll know what I'm going to do. . . . Good-bye!"

He turned towards her. He grasped the extended hand.

"Good-bye," he said. Beneath his breath he said: "You're a damned plucky woman!"

He saw her go down the steps. He saw her step into the taxi. She looked neither to right nor left. The taxi was driven away. He never saw her again.

Felice and his aunt came from that other room.

His aunt was strangely pale with emotion. Felice clung tightly to his arm.

"Tea is served, Hector," said his aunt. Her voice was thin and full of tears.

"Very well, aunt," he said, and turned to follow her out of the room.

She was wiping her eyes as she went on ahead of him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

A FEW days later.

The newspapers had already ceased to make reference to the tragedy of Michael Stradde. The sorry chapter in the history of British commerce was ended.

In a room of his Park Lane house, Lord Pynton awaited the arrival of Mauvine. In reply to her simple note of entreaty that he should give her this appointment "as it may be the last time I shall see you," he had dispatched a telegram, assuring her that all other engagements should be set aside by him, no matter how important they might be.

There was something rather beautiful in the old aristocrat's attitude of mind that late afternoon. The years were passing, so he told himself, but perhaps there was sufficient strength and virility remaining to protect her from the slings and arrows that would be aimed at her. The time was gone when traditional pride in his line would have caused him to remain aloof lest the breath of scandal should taint the family name.

As always, he was dressed in keeping with his breeding and social position. He had stepped straight from the artistic hands of a perfect valet. The lean frame might have been padded here and there, the greying hair might have been faintly touched to deceive, but there was gallantry expressed in the whole of the upright carriage.

As she came into the room he held out a thin, carefully-tended hand in welcome and led her to the chair which had been placed just where he would like to see her—where the fading light that came through the window might illumine her face.

"I am honoured," he said. He stepped back to appraise her.

She lay gracefully in the chair; one tiny foot, green shod, swung slowly like a poplar leaf in the breeze. She removed her gloves; her white hands rested on the arms of the chair, and the fitful movements of the delicate fingers were eloquent of the emotion by which she was controlled.

He turned away to move a simple ornament on an occasional table. He knew that she was troubled beyond the calculating; he wished to give her a chance to recover her composure.

"You have been very kind to me, Lord Pynton," she said at last. "I felt that I couldn't possibly leave London without coming to say good-bye."

He turned around immediately; his grey eyebrows lifted in dismay.

"You are not thinking of leaving London ?" he said.

She raised a hand in mild protest.

"Of course, you must know that I couldn't possibly remain."

He had gone forward and was standing in front of her as she sat there, a forced smile playing about her lips.

"Why not ?" he asked.

"Don't let us talk about that," she said, feigning irritableness. "I have come to see you in order that I might relieve my poor mind of a trouble that is playing havoc with my nerves."

He gave the door a swift, apprehensive glance. She misinterpreted.

"No," she said, "I haven't come to ask for further financial aid."

The old gallant raised both hands in admonishment.

"You may ask anything of me," he said. "It would not be denied if it were within my power to give it."

She nodded as though she had expected that reply. She looked away from him—looked through the window. He fancied that he saw a movement of her lips that hinted at determination to crush down something that was weakening her resolution.

Instantly, he stooped and grasped her hand.

"I am ready to place all I have at your disposal," he said ; "I have told you so before."

She arched her brows and smiled gratefully.

"You've been so good to me," she said. "I wonder why ?"

"I have told you, again and again, that I love you, Mauvine."

Her mood changed. A bitter expression came into her eyes. The restless movement of the right foot stopped.

"Lord Pynton," she said, "I haven't come here to ask you to give me anything. I have come to ask you to take something from me." With a swift movement she opened her handbag and drew out that fateful bundle of notes.

"The five thousand you were so generous to loan for a little while," she said, handing the package to him.

He stared at it incredulously. He tried to speak ; his lips parted and moved without his saying anything.

"Please take it," she said, and her voice was deep and husky. "Take it, and give me the greatest joy that may be left to me in this life. Let me think that I have done something that was worthy of me."

He shook his head in perplexity.

"It is all there," she said. "The whole of the five thousand—just as you handed it to me. There's a stain running through the package but—but you will be able to pay it into your bank without telling them everything."

He stepped back from her and looked away from her as he said :

"I didn't *lend* it to you, Mauvine."

Her tendril-like fingers were clutching the arm-rests of the chair.

"It was what I asked for—a loan," she said.

He shook his head in his bewilderment.

"No, no," he said. "You—you gave me——"

Almost passionately she cried out :

"Please don't say that—that I *earned* it."

"I haven't hinted at that, Mauvine," he said.

A long silence. He waited and there was even greater pain expressed in his face than in hers.

She said, very softly, very tenderly :

"You know why I borrowed that money immediately after—after—" She broke off abruptly.

He hung his head.

"I know now," he replied, "and, God knows, I feel the shame of my position."

"Your position ?" She leaned forward and grasped his hand. "You behaved like a gentleman," she said. "I shall never forget."

"Mauvine ! Mauvine ! I don't feel that I can discuss this further. Can't we forget it ?"

"No," she said gently. "I want to put this matter right. I want you to help me. I want you to take back the money."

He held out his hands imploringly.

"But, I know that you are in difficulties, Mauvine," he said.

"Not exactly in difficulties," she said. "Please take it."

"Why ?"

She straightened herself in her chair.

"I'll tell you," she said with resoluteness. "I'm not the type of woman that indulges mock heroics. When I—I *borrowed* that money it was in order to help the man I loved with all my heart and soul." Her big eyes were full of tears now and she made no attempt to cleanse them. "It was too late to help him—you understand all that."

"But, why give it back, Mauvine. I am a rich man——"

"In my eyes you will be richer," she said, "if you try to understand the sentiment that's moving me now. You see, I was very, very faithful to him until the time came when I just had to help him——"

"Let's forget it, Mauvine."

"Oh, no. I want to return that money to you; it will make me feel cleaner."

"Cleaner? You!"

She gave her head a little shake. Her eyes glowed with a new hope.

"It will be like buying back my loyalty to *him*," she said. "Now do you understand?"

Lord Pynton accepted the package in silence. He went over to the window and stared down into the street. He came back to her.

"You make me feel very, very cheap," he said. "Frankly, honestly, I would give my very life to take back that night."

"And I," she said and closed her eyes.

Another long silence followed.

"I shall pay this money back into your bank," he said, with sudden resolution.

"No, no. I do not need it. I have sold my silver holdings to Mr. Hector Farrar; he was very fine about the whole business. I am all right, financially. Just tell me that you have taken back that money—it is all I ask."

He hesitated, his fingers playing with the package.

"Yes, he said, "but I can't take back *Yesterday*."

"A gentleman could," she said, simply.

"Very well, Mauvine."

"It's going to make me so much happier in the future."

"But what now?"

"Oh, I don't know," she said, affecting indifference. "I've left the Hampstead house and taken a room in a small hotel. I shall decide for myself what shall be the next move."

Instantly, he went and stood before her.

"Mauvine! Listen to me. I had never taken the slightest notice of a woman until I saw you. Listen! Listen! I want you. Come away with me."

It was her turn to misunderstand. She dropped his

hand and sat upright. She believed that he was inviting her to be his mistress.

"Strange, yet what a commentary on modern gallantry," she said. "A woman gives herself to a man. He dies or leaves her. She is faithful to him—has been faithful to him. And when he leaves her, all other men believe that she has become public property!"

Lord Pynton moved away. He plucked at his collar as though it were choking him. He said, commandingly:

"Mauvine, try to bring yourself to realize that I was never so sincere in my life."

And she was watching every movement of his face. She interrupted, although he didn't appear to hear her:

"You don't even know me!"

"I was going to say to you——"

"To you I am no more than a woman who shone in the white lights of what they call fame."

"You have been an inspiration to me ever since the first moment I saw you——"

"I'm nobody—a village girl!" she said, bitterly.

"Life has been very drab to me, Mauvine," he went on thoughtfully. "A round of the clubs, a day at the races, a night in some social set that was always wondering how much money I possessed and how they could get hold of it. . . . And then, I found you . . . Mauvine, I want you—I want you to be my *wife*."

The old furniture in the room seemed to come to life. The old pictures on the walls seemed to lean forward lest they should miss a word.

"You mean that you are asking me to—to marry you?" she said in astonishment.

"I am waiting for your answer, Mauvine."

She shook her head; she held out a hand towards him.

"I shall never marry," she said softly, "for in my heart I am married already."

"You loved him, Mauvine?"

"With all my soul."

"I would try to make you happy," he said pleadingly.

"You have done so already," she said. "I shall never forget the honour you have done me to-day; never cease to thank you for your greatness to me. I shall always remember that there have been *two* great men in my life."

She moved away—towards the door. He started up to follow her, then he sank on the chair that she had left. His hands were pressed over his eyes. He didn't hear the footman speak to her as he met her in the hall, nor did he hear the door open and close, nor the taxi drive away.

She was gone! Just as all these women go—out into space, with a few remembrances making sweet and well worth while the life they have led—or given away. . . .

. . . . .

Hamshaw telephoned to Hector Farrar, who had taken a rest from the turmoil that afternoon.

"Sir," he said, "news is great!"

"Well?"

"Silver has jumped. It is now standing at seventeen pence!"

"Excellent!" was the reply. "It will go to the thirty I said it would. Good!"

THE END

HUTCHINSON & CO.

have pleasure in giving the following brief notices of many important new books and novels of interest for the Autumn, 1931.

The following, either as subjects of biography or as writers and novelists, are amongst the many here represented.

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THIS is another of those cheerful, gay stories of the Irish hunting-field for which Miss Conyers is so famous. In it one finds adventure, romance, and a touch of mystery. *7s. 6d.*

FIRST REVIEWS

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FIRST REVIEW

"He shows how the devastation of war can call forth the utmost sublimity in man. . . . It gives the reader much to think about."
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Author of "A Man's a Man" (40*th thousand*), etc.

THIS is a powerful story of human relations and psychology written in Mrs. Savi's most vigorous style. It contains humour and pathos and poignant situations. A young girl, ignorant of her parentage and brought up in unusual circumstances, meets a man who has plunged himself in indiscretion and follies, only to realize his mistake when it is almost too late. The girl's influence upon him, and on those with whom she comes in contact, forms the nucleus of the plot. *The Pendulum Swings* is undoubtedly one of Mrs. Savi's best stories. *7s. 6d.*

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LESLEY MARVELL, a struggling and impecunious young artist, found herself suddenly the heiress to a large fortune. But in Italy, by the Greek Temples of Pæstum, there came to her the first call to sacrifice, and she is awakened to the fact that, owing to a clause in her grandfather's will, it would be impossible for her to retain her "great possessions".
This is a powerful and challenging story, written with that sincerity, charm and sympathy that a succession of consistently fine novels have led us to expect from Miss Clarke. *7s. 6d.*

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FIRST REVIEWS

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Saml. Pepys Looks at Life

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(Saml. Pepys, Junr.)
With a Foreword by Lord Riddell

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SAMUEL PEPYS, LISTENER, was a diverting book which achieved great popularity and was heartily welcomed by the critics. "If you like vigour in literature," wrote Harold Nicholson in the *Daily Express*, "read this book. Mr. Freeman has really got himself into the skin of Samuel Pepys, and his shrewd parody of Pepys' style and character makes amusing reading. Parodies are always dull unless they add something to the original; Mr. Freeman, with his diabolical insight into the Pepys type, certainly adds something to the original. It is a very clever and scholarly piece of work."

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With Illustrations by Arthur Wragg, 7s. 6d.

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Author of "The Laughing String"

FEW parents can realize that their children are growing up. Mamma and Papa England certainly could not, and to them Vanessa was always "Butterfly". Her parents could not understand why she was dissatisfied with her pleasure-filled life. But Vanessa wanted more than pleasure. She aspired high with her butterfly wings; and she came to grief. She wanted to find out, so she experimented and told white lies; but she was honest (until it hurt) with herself.

Some people may call her a minx, but no one can help loving her and sympathizing with her point of view.

This story of the affairs of a middle-class family, told as it is with charm and humour and a quiet mastery of style, will appeal to and interest a very wide variety of tastes. 7s. 6d.

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The Story of an Airedale Terrier

DE VIC BEAMISH

BETTY was an Airedale terrier, the adored possession of a factory hand. But she was destined for higher things, became famous as a show-dog, and was known "on the bench" as "Miss Perfection". And so Betty was obliged to leave her master and entered into the kennels of a kindly young couple who sought to make a living from their pets. But she couldn't forget the kindness of her former master, and even when taken to the Continent (where she had no end of a time, and numerous doggy amours) she felt within her the longing for her old life.
Eventually, of course, as in all good tales, Betty realized her fondest wish, but not until she had almost broken her doggy heart.
Miss Perfection, with its numerous illustrations, is an altogether delightful publication, designed to amuse and hearten the most jaded reader of modern fiction. *Illustrated*, 5*s*.

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Diana swore revenge, but what hope had she against the fierce passion of a Gael, or, when captured, possessed and held prisoner by a man who followed his natural impulses rather than the conventions of the twentieth century? . . . *7s. 6d.*

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Could such a thing be? It sounds preposterous, but there were reasons. Glamorous and quite enchanting reasons. . . . *7s. 6d.*

FIRST REVIEW

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MISS JACOB is a novelist of distinction whose popularity grows apace with each succeeding publication. In *That Wild Lie* and *Seen Unknown* she gave us two unforgettable pictures of Jewish life and character. Now, in *Roots*, she gives us a character study of a Yorkshire woman. The scenes are set for the most part in the West Riding of Yorkshire—the Broad Acres. Sarah Ann Whitelaw loved her lands with a passionate affection which made no sacrifice seem too great. This powerful, poignant study could only have been written by a Yorkshire woman who knows and understands the curious twists and single-mindedness of those who live on, and love, the Broad Acres. *7s. 6d.*

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Author of "The Dreamer Wakes", etc.

WHEN the gipsy told her that she might yet be Pharaoh's Lady, Vashti did not understand. From the outset she had known herself a changeling. No heritage was hers in road or rooftree, and she held herself quits with a scheme in which she had no place.

Forests, fields, and bracken-covered hills supply the background to this strange, untamed and passionate tale of Vashti—child of nature who is forced to play her solitary rôle. It is a story full of fine writing, of exquisite descriptions. *7s. 6d.*

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FIRST REVIEWS

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ALEC CAUSTON was little more than a boy when the Great War came. To him it was Life's supreme adventure, a golden opportunity which would never otherwise have occurred to him in the humble circumstances in which he had been brought up. He survived it with some distinction, but afterwards nothing seemed to him worth while. He married and settled down in the suburbs, but found no pleasure in his home life. Theo Barton belonged to a more spacious world. Her life had been varied and interesting, but she felt herself growing tired of her independence, old and stale. *Flair* is the story of the meeting of these two, their mutual attraction, the happiness they gave each other and also the sorrow. A notable and distinguished first novel. *7s. 6d.*

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When Churchyards Yawn

Compiled by LADY CYNTHIA ASQUITH
Who also compiled "Shudders".

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Historical

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"THOSE who search the Sabatini pages in search of adventure", wrote a *Daily Telegraph* critic, "will not fail to enjoy a bold story told with all the vigour we are accustomed to expect in one of our most romantic novelists." There is, indeed, a thrill and an undeniable glamour to be obtained from the novels of Sabatini which can be got from few living authors. For he creates so vividly and so intensely the colour and life of past days, whilst his characters are bold, strong and alive.
Scaramouche is one of his most notable and lovable creations ; and in this story we meet him again moving, working, planning behind the turmoil of the French Revolution. His adventures are breathless, but he survives them all, and from the first page to the last of this fine romance the reader is carried along, held enthralled by the fine magic of Rafael Sabatini. 7*s.* 6*d.*

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WHAT sort of woman was Joan of Acre, Countess of Gloucester and Baron of England in her own right, who, for love's sake, jeopardized her rank and power ? What manner of man was Ralph de Monthermer, and could he prove worthy of what his lady had risked for him ? Here for the first time the strange tale is told in novel form by an author whose stories of bygone England have attracted considerable attention. This book follows history closely, for history is the story of living men and women ; and these three, Joan of Acre, Ralph de Monthermer, and King Edward I are very much alive and of no common mettle. 7*s.* 6*d.*

HISTORICAL]

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It is the romance of Gilda Wraye, who, when only seventeen, went to the Chinese Masquerade and fell an innocent victim to the wiles of Sir Lucas Brede. She fled from him to the country, and was there befriended. But the dreaded shadow of the Flittermouse fell across her path and she became involved in a series of extraordinary events.

The stories of J. G. Sarasin always entertain. They portray so faithfully and so colourfully the atmosphere of those past days. Her characters live with intensity, and the reader is able to follow their adventures with interest from the first page to the last. ***7s. 6d.***

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7s. 6d.

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C. T. STONEHAM

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THIS is the intensely exciting story of a child reared by a lioness in Africa to become leader of a wild lion pack, imbued with all the characteristics of his terrible friends. "It is the best thing of its kind I have read," writes Sir Philip Gibbs, "and I believe it will attract an unusual notice as something quite off the beaten track."

7s. 6d.

FIRST REVIEW

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Author of "Jimgrim", "Jungle Jest", etc.

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The Coat of Arms is his latest story, and in it he tells . . . but enough said! *7s. 6d.*

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On the face of it April Fools' Day would appear to have little connection with a terrible murder and its consequences. And even when the victim is a constable posted within Scotland Yard itself, the position would scarcely seem to lend itself to tragedy. That it can, and does, however, the reader will discover in this new and thrilling story by an author whose popularity is rapidly assuming mammoth proportions. *7s. 6d.*

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MARY AND WHITMAN CHAMBERS

Eleven white folk, seven officers and four women, herded together at a naval supply base in the sweltering damp of the Panama coast—tempers frayed, nerves strained to breaking-point. . . . And then one evening when a childish game of hide-and-seek is in progress the horror begins. A native dart is driven into a man's side in circumstances which preclude any chance of a native assassin. Horror-stricken men and women look at each other in terrified suspicion, but the shaft of murder, once launched, goes on and on. . . . *7s. 6d.*

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THE Clavering family were happy and united. They were gathered together to welcome David's bride; a time of jollity and blissful happiness for everyone concerned. Then, unexpectedly, tragically, Mr. Clavering died, a victim of poison, which only somebody amongst that happy company could have administered. And so suspicion grew in their minds as to whom it might be. . . . Bruce Graeme is a brilliant mystery-maker and a brilliant novelist into the bargain. 7s. 6d

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BURTON E. STEVENSON

Author of "The Coast of Enchantment", etc.

SWIFT and horrible was that murder resulting from the clash of East and West. . . .

In this tale all the weird mysticism of the East is inextricably entangled with the murder of an old Orientalist. Carnevali, in whose veins ran the hot blood of the Latins; Chunder, learned in the cunning of the East; and Challis, with the cool nerve of the Westerner, had equally compelling motives for the crime. But clues conflict; fresh crimes follow, and excitement becomes intense, until at last the Professor's murderer is run to earth. 7s. 6d.

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Another Race Williams Detective Story.

A story of the new underworld—the Racketeer who rides in high-priced cars, wears high-priced clothes, and lives by the law of the night—the law of the gun.

Several forces attempt to gain control of a great city's underworld by having a single leader—one great power combining all the city's rackets under one head. 7s. 6d.

FIRST REVIEW

"Terrifically exciting."—NEWS-CHRONICLE.

The Silver Arrow

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